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African-American and Black women's process of learning, unlearning and resisting internalized racism

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Bianca M. Blakesley
African-American and Black
Women's Processes of Learning,
Unlearning and Resisting
Internalized Racism

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to address the research question, how do African American/Black Women unlearn internalized racism, and to understand the relationship between internalized racism and racial identity development. Internalized racism was defined as the acceptance of negative, stereotypical or devaluing ideas and beliefs about ones own racial group, and about oneself as a member of that group.

A series of 11 interview questions explored the processes in which Black women learn and unlearn racism over time. Thirteen self-identified Black/African-American women were interviewed regarding their experiences. They were further questioned regarding their methods of coping with and resisting internalized racism.

The findings demonstrated that internalized racism causes long term behavioral and psychological effects for the Black women in this study, and partially supported existing literature on racial identity development models. Participants named a variety of creative and wise ways to challenge internalized racism. These findings hold significance for those who seek to understand and acknowledge how internalized racism impacts the lives of Black women, and for those who would support positive, healthy Black identity development.

**AFRICAN-AMERICAN AND BLACK WOMEN'S PROCESSES OF LEARNING,
UNLEARNING AND RESISTING INTERNALIZED RACISM**

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

“Internalized racism [...] causes discomfort because it suggests that the effects of racism are deeper and broader than many would like to admit. As a result, it remains one of the least explained features of racism" (Pyke & Dang, 2003).

“It's a good day to be black in America because we are beautiful. Always have been. Always gonna be. But it's a good day to be Black because we have a chance to grab ahold of our Blackness and shake it out. It's time to pull it back out of the closet, air out the afro puffs and pin that blackness to a clothes line and take a good look at it” (Campos, 2012).

Although the effects of systemic, structural and individual racism are increasingly addressed in social work and social science discourse, insufficient attention is dedicated to the psychological effect of racism (also referred to as white supremacy) experienced uniquely by persons of color--*internalized racism*. Due to the discomfort, confusion and embarrassment this concept raises, it is surrounded by an “intellectual taboo” (Russell, Wilson & Hall, 1992 qtd. in Pyke & Dang, 2003). Aside from the discomfort, a valid concern raised by scholars on the subject cautions that the study of internalized racism will lead to “blaming the victims” and subvert attention away from the very racist institutions and dominant structures that produce such an ideology. It then must be emphasized that internalized racism is a reaction to white supremacy, not a source of racism itself; However, the avoidance that manifests in the literature can be an expression of internalized racial oppression in itself, as it affirms the shame and discomfort around the topic and perpetuates the invisibility of this self-

perpetuating “hidden wound”. Understanding the mechanisms and processes around internalized racism is essential to clinical practice with clients of color whom grapple with negotiating their sense of self in a devaluing, racist (white supremacist) US culture. The primary research question of this study asks: How do African-American and Black women unlearn internalized racism, and what is its relationship to racial identity development?

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

The purpose of this study is to explore how African-American/Black women unlearn internalized racism in the process of racial identity development. Literature on internalized racism and its relation to racial identity development mainly emerges from the work of prominent social theorists and within allied disciplines of social work, including counseling and social psychology. The limited interdisciplinary research that is currently available narrates the purpose of internalized racism in wider systems of domination, psychological impacts, impacts across intersectional identities, and implications for intervention. There is little empirical research documenting the process of internalized racism and its relation to racial identity development--an area of inquiry which holds significant clinical implications. The relationship between internalized racism and racial identity development is reviewed for this study within two theoretical models.

Defining Terms

Racism, for the current study, is defined as a system of advantage based on a race and is a pervasive, if not foundational, aspect of US socialization with perennial historical and sociocultural underpinnings. The system of advantage is poised to benefit Whites as a dominant group in the context of U.S. culture, although this system is differentially harmful to all racial groups. Therefore, race itself is an ideology that assigns power to groups based on perceived

categorical differences that are not rooted in real biological differences (Smedley & Smedley, 2005).

Internalized racism occurs through a process in which people from the subordinated group (people of color) come to accept negative, stereotypical or devaluing ideas and beliefs about their own racial group, and about themselves as a member of that group. Internalized racism has also been defined as “the process of absorbing consciously or unconsciously the values and beliefs of the oppressor and subscribing to the stereotypes and misinformation about one’s group, sometimes leading to “low self esteem, self-hate, the disowning of one’s group, and other complex behaviors that influence and impair quality of life” (Alleyne, 2004).

In general, the idea that oppression is internalized is commonly acknowledged across literature on the psychological dynamics of oppression (Speight, 2007). In the United States, one manifestation of this phenomenon is shown through the acceptance of white culture’s oppressive actions towards Black people: discrimination, hatred, falsification of historical facts, racist doctrines, white supremacist ideology and a rejection of African worldviews (Bailey et. al, 2011). Claims regarding the internalization of negative beliefs about one’s group are also generally supported in the literature on Modified Labeling Theory (MLT). MLT endorses that public stigma is correlated with increased self-stigma over time, and interventions on an individual level may be necessary to begin to dismantle societal attitudes (Vogel et al., 2013).

Theories of Historical and Systemic Relevance with Systems of Inequality

On its significance, Speight (2007) upholds that internalized racism is a self-perpetuating function of oppression that constitutes one of the most “damaging psychological

[injuries]”, while the oppressed group loses its ability to define itself while buying into messages about its prescribed inferiority. The daily institutionalization and normalization of (racial) oppression is reinforced by the oppressed group’s acceptance of the dominant group’s beliefs. Within their own belief system, the dominant group has the power to define experiences of the oppressed and define what is normative. As a result, through hegemony the dominant group erases the language, culture, history of subordinate groups while imposing misrepresentations. The dominant group’s imposed culture is seen as “normal” while the subordinate group’s is seen as inferior (2007). Hegemony, defined as the positioning and centering of one group’s beliefs, politics, culture and ideologies as superior over another, also brings attention to how racism can be *indirectly* internalized through cultural myths and ideologies that otherwise seem unrelated to race (Pyke, 2003). A popular example is the “myth of meritocracy”, which upholds the belief that individual advancement and opportunity is obtained solely on the basis of achievement and skill (2003). This has grave psychological consequences; when members of marginalized racial groups turn to larger society to construct their sense of self, they are served with colonized, inferior images of themselves presented as reality and lose the option to independently define themselves (Speight, 2007).

Lisa Poupart (2003) recounted one manifestation of this process. She claimed that prior to European contact, traditional American Indian societies valued all members of their community, and relationships between men and women were viewed as symmetrical and mirroring. Elders, women and children were not only valued, but honored in their unique roles within the community. Spiritual world views prohibited harm by individuals against other beings in daily tribal life—a sin against the spiritual world. She reported that through the processes of

colonization, American Indian people have internalized white patriarchy and Western constructions of abject Otherness upon which patriarchal power is justified and maintained:

Within these Western patriarchal-family structures, many American Indians recreate the power structures of the dominant culture. That is, Indian men often have privilege and authority over Indian women, and Indian fathers and mothers have privilege and authority over children, whereby each may exert violence as a socially acceptable operation of Western patriarchal power (Poupart, 2003)

The violence enacted by American Indian men upon their families is understood as a manifestation of internalized oppression, internalized white patriarchy, and consumptions of Western constructions of “otherness”; “others’ who internalize the dominant subject position may express pain, grief, and rage outwards onto families and communities. While dominant narratives may hold Indian communities solely accountable for disenfranchisement, they miss the victimization produced by Euro-American imperialist governments, religions, economies, and educational systems.

Individual expressions of internal oppression are affected by individual material situations and experiences. Thus, potentially as many expressions of internal oppression exist as experiences of oppression. It is likely that the harm these expressions pose to self or others is related to the extent that one is marginalized and oppressed by the dominant culture (Poupart, 2013).

An argument of emphasis demonstrated in the etiology of internalized racism is that internalized racism is not the fault of the oppressed, nor should it be viewed as a stigma, deficit, or pathology; it does not come into existence in isolation or emerge indigenously in a group of exploitable others (Schwalbe et. al., 2000 qtd. in Pyke & Dang, 2003). When

examining attitudes or beliefs indicative of internalized racism, Pyke (2010) asks, “Where is the re-sistance in this case of internalized racism?” The resistance flourishes in acts of self-preservation and survival that seem contradictory to the broader psychological impact and function of internalized racial oppression as previously described; *internalized racism is an adaptive response that replicates inequity* (Pyke & Dang, 2003). However, one can deduce that internalized racism is not only a “hidden wound” of racism, but in some ways a defense against the psychological trauma of a hostile, white supremacist context. Pyke and Dang also purport that bringing attention to internalized racism also holds impact for whites, who are generally ignorant on the subject. This lack of awareness continues to benefit Whites, as they are not held accountable for the problem of internalized racism while remaining unaware of it’s existence (Pyke, 2003).

Psychological Impacts

Research demonstrates that internalized racism holds serious and sometimes lethal individual and systemic psychological impacts on all persons of color; people of color come to internalize negative beliefs about themselves that are first perpetuated and reinforced within these larger systems and institutions in the US, and this process produces negative psychological impact. Literature supports that internalized racial stereotypes are associated with a diminished ability to cope with stress, due to the fact that individuals cannot rely on a positive self-concept and racial identity as a buffer against discrimination (Carter, 2007). Recent studies have also linked internalized racism to negative physical health outcomes. Some findings have shown that internalized racism is correlated with increased abdominal obesity, dysregulation of cortisol, and greater stick of metabolic abnormalities in Caribbean Black women, even when controlling for age, anxiety, depression and education (Tull, 1999; 2005).

Ken Hardy describes the harmful effects that the internalization of racist messages from the dominant group can entail in slightly different terms in his work with youth of color. He cites “internalized devaluation” as a direct by-product of racism, “inextricably linked to the deification of whiteness and demonization of non-white hues” in both explicit and implicit ways (Hardy, 2013). For example, the placement of youth of color into residential homes where all of their peers look like them may reinforce a powerful message that is internalized throughout childhood of “I am bad and unworthy” (2013).

A phenomenon coined as “stereotype threat” has also been pervasively studied in African-American samples as well for those with other racial identities. Stereotype threat is defined as “being at risk of confirming, as self-characteristic, a negative stereotype about one's group” (Steele & Aronson, 1995). The social psychology researchers demonstrated that salience of stereotype threat caused Black participants to underperform in relation to whites on a “diagnostic” verbal test, but not in non-diagnostic conditions. In addition, they also showed that mere salience of a negative stereotype could impair Blacks’ performance even when the task was not diagnostic. Simply being aware of a negative stereotype about one’s racial group caused performance in line with the stereotype.

Extending far beyond individual psychological harm, some social theorists have theorized about the psychological impact of internalized racism on entire communities on a societal level. Poupart (2013) asserts that American Indians, one of the most economically, socially, and politically disenfranchised groups in the United states, “sometimes express internal oppression outwardly upon our families and other Indian people in physical assaults, homicide, alcohol and drug abuse, and in violence against women and children” (Poupart, 2013). In removing the subject of race and internalized racism from the narrative, marginalized

groups view themselves as solely responsible for their own political, economic, social and cultural disempowerment, removing the need for the dominant group to overtly threaten or coerce oppressive power dynamics—the groups police themselves by replicating the dominant group (2013).

Models of Racial Identity Development

Racial identity development describes the process of moving from a racialized self-concept rooted in internalized racism to a position of empowerment based on a positively affirmed sense of racial identity (Tatum, 2007). Original and revised models of racial identity development in African Americans suggest that internalized racism is a natural consequence of forming an identity in a western society imbued with white supremacist worldviews. In this society where race-group membership is implicitly or explicitly salient, this process occurs, in some form, in every person (Tatum, 1992). William Cross's (1971, 1978) models of Black identity development theorize that this process occurs in African Americans in about three to four stages, each associated with a cluster of traits and processes. Cross's model was later revised to include five stages of identity development identified as Preencounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization-Commitment.

The Preencounter stage is associated with “an initial acceptance and attempted assimilation of the beliefs and values of dominant white culture, including the internalization of negative Black stereotypes outside of awareness (Tatum, 1992). In the Cross model, this stage was regarded with increasing complexity in it's subsistence of two clusters—a group with assimilationist attitudes and low-salience of racial identity, and those of adopt self-hating, anti-Black perspectives due to extreme miseducation about their racial group in the education system (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, & Cokley, 2001). As noted by both Tatum and Vandiver et al., the

acceptance of negative beliefs about Blacks (internalized racism) necessitates denial that race actually impacts outcomes in their life. Through use of denial, the individual can maintain psychological comfort in longing to be in the “in” group while simultaneously receiving messages that this belonging is not possible. It is in this vein that the formation of internalized racism is both a helpful and harmful psychological mechanism. However, it is the strong and pervasive messages of *unbelonging* that precipitates an individual’s moving into the *Encounter Stage*, where there is a growing awareness of the impact of racism on one’s own life.

The Immersion/Emersion stage is characterized by an enthusiastic desire to surround oneself with positive, visible symbols of one’s racial identity while avoiding and rejecting symbols of Whiteness (Tatum, 1992). Opportunities to actively explore aspects of one’s own history and form connections with others of one’s own racial background are present. A newly defined and affirmed sense of self emerges. Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, & Cokley (2001) note that anti-white anger and attitudes can also strongly present at this stage but may dissipate as more energy is focused on their own racial identity. However, internalized racism also manifests in the immersion stage, where a “Blacker than thou” attitude may emerge; individuals in this stage have difficulty tolerating others still in the “pre-encounter” phase of development. This intolerance diminishes with the “Internalization Stage”, when a more secure sense of self develops.

The Internalization and Internalization Commitment stages are characterized by the individual, grounded in a positive sense of racial identity (but not superiority), perceiving and transcending race; translating their personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action or anchor point from which to discover “a universe of ideas and cultures beyond themselves” (2001). This stage implies a lack of internalized racism, but these models do not account for internalized

racism present in every stage as the individual encounters new situations, contexts, challenges and histories. The models also do not explain fluidity across this linear spread. Intersections of gender, sexuality, and other aspects of identity as they intersect with internalized racism are also not explicitly accounted for. *Intersections of Identity*

As stated, the majority of research on internalized racism, particularly in its relation to racial identity development, does not explicitly incorporate analysis of gender, sexuality, and other intersecting social identities. The study of intersectionality is recommended to better articulate and account for the unique ways in which individuals with multiple oppressed identities, such as women of color, uniquely experience overlapping systems of subordination while they are simultaneously marginalized within the study of those systems (Crenshaw, 1991). Among the populations studied on the impacts of internalized racism, Szymanski & Gupta (2009) recognized that the experiences of people of color with multiple intersecting marginalized identities, such as LGBTQ African Americans, were largely unexamined. They found that in this population, both internalized racism and internalized heterosexism were predictors of low self-esteem, but only internalized heterosexism was a predictor of psychological distress. They speculate that internalized heterosexism as predictor of psychological distress may relate to the perception by LGBTQ African Americans that the African American community is intolerant of homosexuality, so a racial affinity is protective while sexuality is isolating (2009). However, this raises the question of why racial identification is predicted as a protective factor that is less related to psychological distress if, by definition, an individual's internalized racism indicates a disfavor and disavowal of one's own racial group.

The study of the perception and impact of racism and sexism on individuals with multiple marginalized identities has also revealed unique discrepancies in internalized oppressions. Remedios, Chasteen, & Paek (2011) found in a randomized study that Asian women made stronger internal attributions to explain racism than sexism, and reported experiencing more depression following a race-based rejection than a gender-based rejection. Findings indicated that these women were more likely to think race-based discrimination was due to something about themselves, rather than attribute discrimination to racism. However, the women were less likely to make internal attributions to gender-based discrimination. Even for individuals with multiple marginalized identities, the particular tendency to internalize race-based discrimination is more likely. To explain this discrepancy, the authors postulate that the Asian women, who also reported perceiving more racism than sexism in their environments, perceived sexism as more immediate and circumscribed as compared to racism, which is regarded as a more salient, constant threat (2011).

Internalized Racism and Racial Identity Development

To date, only one study was found to have directly empirically examined the relationship between racial identity attitudes and internalized racism. While prior models of racial identity development have established a *theoretical* link between racial identity and internalized racism, the particular relationship between the two has remained unstudied. In her model, Janet Helms (1995) credits the development of a positive racial identity to the overcoming of internalized racism conceptually, yet does not explicitly examine how internalized racism might be related to stages of Black identity development. Cokley (2002) used Cross's revised racial identity development scale to investigate the relationship between stages of Black identity development and internalized racism in 153 self-identified

Black college students attending a historically Black southern college. Using a canonical correlation, he found that stages of racial identity development are roughly parallel to “degrees of internalized racialism”; for example, in the earlier “pre-encounter stage”, miseducation and self-hatred attitudes were significantly and positively related to beliefs in the mental and genetic deficiencies of Blacks (2002). However, many nuanced and perhaps counterintuitive results appeared in the findings. Although Cokley sought to measure African American students’ acceptance of both positive *and* negative stereotypes of Blacks in his operationalization of “internalized racialism”, other authors posit that the acceptance of stereotypes is not an adequate or thorough measurement of internalized racism. Bailey et. al. (2011) proposed a scale containing *five* dimensions of internalized racial oppression beyond self-hate and identification with racial stereotypes: internalization of negative stereotypes, self-destructive behaviors, devaluation of the African worldview and motifs, belief in the biased representation of history, and alteration of physical appearance. Cross’s (1991,1995) theory of racial identity scale is useful to examine whether movement across stages of racial identity development are associated with reduction of internalized racism, but the measurement of internalized racism itself is not modeled well, thereby complicating the construct validity of the empirical literature.

While the operationalization of internalized racism continues to expand in more nuanced ways, there appears to be a lack of expansion of the scale to other racial groups whose manifestations of internalized racism are different; subsequently the majority of the literature reviewed above is specifically concerned with models of racial identity development and internalized racism as studied in African American samples. As Pyke & Dang (2010) clarify, the brand of racism that Asian Americans experience is distinct from

other racial groups, and this group's subordinated racial status is often erased and overlooked "by their relative "valorization vis-a-vis blacks", i.e. the model minority stereotype. In their interviews with 184 Korean and Vietnamese "1.5" and second-generation Americans, the authors found that the labeling of others as "FOB"s or "whitewashed" in regards to their relative assimilation to White American standards was a predominant theme in the construction of their own racialized experiences (2010). Studies on this subject typically examine the experience of one racial group due to particular racializations by whites, which make all people of color's experiences with internalized racism unique.

Clinical Implications

Given the negative psychological impact of internalized racism as documented in the literature, significance must be assigned towards examining clinicians' use and methods of intervention for this phenomenon. Watts-Jones (2002) suggested that clinical intervention of internalized racism in African American women should occur first in a within-groups setting to allow for the exploration of sensitive and painful material. She associated internalized racism with two levels of shame; secondary shame is experienced by the women as shame of being ashamed, and the primary shame refers to a diminished sense of self. Women of African descent, who may usually defend against feeling vulnerable for the sake of survival, must feel comfortable enough to process secondary shame and thus talk about primary shame. Watts-Jones believes that only other African American therapists may be equipped to support this initial processing, which raises questions about how internalized racism is adequately addressed on the clinical level between therapists of color and clients of color (2002).

In her pedagogical understanding of addressing race in classroom settings, Beverly Tatum, trained as an educator and clinical psychologist, asserts that naming the problem of race and predictable emotional reactions related to identity development is an intervention in and of itself. She asserts that students “consider their own guilt, shame, embarrassment, or anger an uncomfortable experience that they alone are having” (Tatum, 1997). Informing students that their emotional responses in talking and learning about racism is “ethically necessary”, predictable, and related to their own racial identity development; naming this process helps normalize the students’ experience (Tatum, 1997). Tatum also stated, “An understanding of internalized oppression can help students of color recognize the ways in which they may have unknowingly participated in their own victimization, or the victimization of others. They may be able to move beyond victimization to empowerment, and share their learning with others” (Tatum, 1997).

Tatum also draws connections between a relational perspective on racial identity development (Tatum, 1997) by assuming that movement through these common stages does occur “in emotional connection with others”, which she observed in her interviews with African American women who grew up in predominantly white communities. She showed that the social rejection that occurred in these communities precipitates movement into the “Encounter” stage, which typically begins in adolescence. However, complete withdrawal from social peers who perpetuate denigrating messages about these girls’ Black identity would result in social isolation. A solution to this dilemma becomes denial of certain aspects of self which are deemed culturally different from the majority, and denial of perceptions of racism (Tatum, 1997), allowing a process through which the person of color can remain in connection with those who convey messages of exclusion. Subsequently, “the cost of this denial of

experience is internalized oppression, blaming oneself for relational disconnection” (Tatum, 1997). Self-blame for disconnection then becomes a psychological consequence of internalized racism, which itself is a defense against isolation and social harm brought about by racism—a double edged sword that is both adaptive and maladaptive.

For these women, healing power comes from connection with peers from one’s own racial group (1993, Tatum), providing a “corrective relational experience” to counter the previous internalized negative messages about themselves and other members of their racial group. Friends can model others ways of being Black and female counter to negative stereotypes imbued in predominantly white communities. This occurs in the context of mutual relationships in which one feels “heard, seen and understood” (1993). Similar to Watts-Jones (2002), she suggests that the very opportunity for same-race relationships that are growth-enhancing is integral to the Internalization stage of racial identity development and an overall sense of empowerment. She summarizes “those of us who would work with young Black women in a mutually empathic relational mode must ask ourselves if we are prepared to understand their authentically told experience. Unless the answer is ‘yes,’ we will not be able to help facilitate the empowerment of these young women as they move through the process of racial identity development” (Tatum, 1993).

Clinical Meaning in Psychodynamic Orientations.

Within psychodynamic-oriented theoretical frameworks, internalized racism may be acknowledged with slightly different terminology. For example, Allyne asserts that in order for Black people to heal from the impact of “historical enmeshment”, in which the baggage of racism contributes to a co-dependent relationship between Blacks and the “White Others”, Black people must confront their “inner tyrant” that is the internal oppressor (2004). The

internal oppressor is the aspect of the self that carries difficult historical and intergenerational baggage into the present and colors interactions with racial others. This author asserts that the necessary task in clinical practice that Black individuals experience in workplace oppression is the process of separating what emotional content belongs to black people and what belongs to the white Other, which may include dynamics produced from the co-dependency: irrational fear, guilt, projections, displacement of negative feelings, and over compensatory defenses. In other words, examining the impact of the “internal oppressor” is again a concept relevant to helping Blacks within clinical practice.

Simon Clarke (1999) conceptualized an understanding of internalized racial oppression through a psychoanalytic framework. He postulated that the racially oppressed are affected the targets of “projective identification”, a psychological defense in which one disavows a powerful negative affective state onto a recipient, who then comes to identify with that unpalatable disavowed state (1999). He asserted that this phenomenon is perpetuated on a societal level against racial Others, and can lead to feelings of inadequacy and low self-esteem in the recipient (feelings that originate in the mind of the “projector”)(1999). In a powerful example, Clarke highlighted this impact through the narrative of the Afro-Caribbean revolutionary Frantz Fanon, who described the experience projective identification as so intense that racism is “introjected and internalized”(1999).

Gaps in the Literature

Quantitative research on the subject of racism has largely focused on measuring inequalities such as resource distribution but neglected to attend to the processes involved in creating or internalized inequality (Pyke, 2003). Qualitative analysis are particularly useful to capture the perceptions and experiences of the subordinated and whether they “respond with

resistance or complicity”(2003). Furthermore, individuals of color with multiple marginalized identities have been understudied or ignored in the literature. Pyke (2003) underlines the assumption that an understanding of the psychological effects of racism would be incomplete without a consideration of internalized racism, and internalized racism has been aversively understudied (2003). This aversion is a disservice to the field. The subject of inquiry in the current research seeks to gain insight into this gap by investigating the process of racial identity development through the lens of Cross’s (1995) racial identity development model and its relationship to internalized racism in developing a positive, self-affirming racial identity in Black women.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

The purpose of this study is to examine Black women's processes of unlearning internalized racism and the relationship between internalized racism and racial identity development. The guiding research question for this study is, "how do African American/Black women unlearn internalized racism?"

A qualitative study design is used to obtain this data. While a mixed-methods study design was considered, empirical scales measuring Black identity development and internalized racism as incompatible with the purposes of this study. The research question focuses on the fluid process of an individual's change in perception of their race, and does not seek to prescriptively define what race and internalized racism means to any person. Additionally, because of the lack of literature on this subject, the study is exploratory in nature. For this reason, in-depth qualitative data examining the contextualized experiences of a number of participants is desired.

Sample

Participants are 13 self-identified African American/Black monoracial or multiracial women over age 18. The inclusion of multiracial individuals honors self-definition and the fluidity of racial identity. Women of other racial identities were excluded from this study because racial oppression is experienced uniquely by different racial groups (Harrell, 2000). An effort was made to include

participants from a variety of settings in the community to account for diversity in socioeconomic status and educational background (see recruitment section).

Recruitment

Prior to the recruitment of participants for this research, approval for the study and all safeguards to ensure ethical standards were obtained from the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review (HSR) Committee (Appendix B).

Using convenience and “snowball” sampling, participants were recruited through email, craigslist and social media (Facebook) advertisements. The inclusion criteria are included on the recruitment material, and was reviewed with participants during initial contact. Participants were encouraged to share advertisement solicitations with their own networks, particularly those likely to include Black women. As an incentive to complete the study, participants were offered the opportunity to enter a drawing to win a \$20 Amazon gift card for their participation.

Participants expressed interest by contacting the researcher via the email listed on the recruitment materials. Through email, I explained the procedures of the study and offered the potential participant the opportunity to be interviewed for no more than 1.5 hours in person, via phone or skype, or to record their responses to the interview questions. Some participants chose to write their responses to the interview questions in lieu of an interview. Interview questions and the consent form were sent via email to each participant prior to the interview. I chose these options to provide ample time for potential participants to gain further knowledge

about the research and solidify their participation with sufficient time to reflect on their responses, thereby shortening interview time (Appendix D). Prior to the interview, all participants gave informed consent by returning the consent form to the researcher through mail or email.

At the conclusion of the interview, all participants were offered information on counseling resources (local, state and national). Participants who sent in written responses received this information via email.

Ethical Safeguards

Confidentiality.

All participants were informed that anonymity could not be guaranteed because of the nature of conducting personal interviews, but every effort was made to keep participants' responses and information about their identity confidential. To protect confidentiality, I assigned each participant a number to link their consent form and interview responses. I asked each participants to choose an alias name to be used if their responses would be directly quoted in the research. Only this researcher had access to participant data. Computer files of the participant log and audio recordings have been password protected and will be held for three years as required by Federal regulations after which they will be destroyed or kept secure for as long as they are needed. All identifying information was stripped before data was shared with the research advisor of this study.

Risks and benefits of participation.

The consent form underlined foreseeable risks and benefits of participation in this study, which was reviewed with participants prior to conducting any

interviews. In terms of risk, due to the sensitive and personal nature of my inquiry, it is possible that individuals felt stress or experienced discomfort when talking about race, racism, and the impact on racism on their sense of self. To address this risk, all participants were informed at the beginning of the interview that they had the right to decline to answer any question, or end the interview for any reason without explanation. I monitored for signs of discomfort or distress in in-person and phone interviews. At the conclusion of each study, all participants received a referral list of mental health resources, counseling centers and emergency centers locally and nationally in case additional support was desired.

As a benefit for participation, individuals were given the opportunity to discuss their experiences on a topic generally perceived with stigma, affirm their experiences, and gain insight into coping with the impact of racism on one's sense of self. Participants seemed eager to contribute to an under-researched area within social work; and understood the the mechanisms and processes surrounding internalized racism is essential to clinical practice with clients of color who grapple with negotiating their sense of self in a devaluing, racist (white supremacist) U.S. culture.

Additionally, participants were offered the opportunity to enter into a drawing to win a \$20 Amazon gift card at the completion of their participation.

Data Collection

I arranged interviews with participants in person, through Skype, or over the phone for no more than 1.5 hours. Prior to the interview, I engaged in conversation with participants about the purpose of this study and their feedback and impression

of the subject of research. The one-on-one interview protocol consisted of 11 open-ended questions (Appendix D). The last question of the protocol was intentionally designed to gain feedback from participants about how they conceptualized the themes of their own experience and interview responses. I included this question to better understand what the participant wanted to communicate to me, the researcher, and where they stressed points of emphasis in the data. I believe this procedure introduced a more collaborative method of induction to the data analysis.

I audio recorded all interviews. Some participants also submitted pre-written responses to interview questions when in-person or phone interviews could not be arranged due to schedule conflicts. Audio recordings were encrypted and saved on this researcher's computer

Data Analysis

A general inductive approach was used to analyze this data, following the suggested procedures outlined by Thomas (2006). As the subject of inquiry in this study was exploratory in nature and sought to address a lack of qualitative literature on how Black women combat internalized racism, this general strategy was appropriate (as it is not guided by specific deductive methodology). Thomas asserts that "The primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes inherent in raw data, without the restraints imposed by structured methodologies. Key themes are often obscured, reframed or left invisible because of the preconceptions in the data collection and data analysis procedures imposed by deductive data analysis

such as those used in experimental and hypothesis testing research” (2006). As such, this approach allowed for raw data of responses to be organized into condensed, defensible themes which may support previous theories on racial identity development or may reveal new model processes. In addition, inductive content thematic analysis “is used in cases where there are no previous studies dealing with the phenomenon,” and thus categories are derived more directly from the data, providing a richer description of the data overall (Vaismoradi, Turunen, & Bondas, 2013). This method also allows for disconfirming data to be more openly received.

In accordance with these guidelines, participants’ responses were transcribed verbatim into written form, except for the instances when participants already pre-wrote their responses. The transcripts were read closely several times to identify themes and categories. Emerging themes were developed by studying the transcripts and considering either how they fit into pre-existing themes or signified new meaning. Categories were conceptualized into broad themes.

Transcripts were coded “horizontally” which involved grouping responses to each interview question together and looking for themes. Towards the end of the study no new themes emerged, which suggested that all major themes had been identified.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

The purpose of this study was to address the research question, how do African American/Black Women unlearn internalized racism, and to understand the relationship between internalized racism and racial identity development. A series of 11 interview questions explored the processes in which Black women learn and unlearn racism over time (Appendix D).

My findings revealed several themes that were consistent with my literature review and that resonated with Beverly Tatum's Racial Identity Development and William Cross' Black Identity Development/"Nigrescence" models. These themes were identified as Pre-Encounter, Encounter, Immersion/Emersion, Internalization, and Internalization/Commitment. These five stages of Black identity development served as an organizing framework for data in understanding shifts in internalized racism over the participants' life course. As participants' cognizance of internalized racism changed over time, it often correlated with the stages of identity development, which postulates that Black women move towards a positive and secure sense of racial identity over time.

Hearing the diverse narratives of these women enabled me to listen and interpret their current thoughts on internalized racism, as well as their shifting perspectives on their racial identity over the course of their lives. In each interview, participants began by reflecting upon when they first became conscious of their racial identity and its meaning, and then moved into discussing how internalizing racist messages impacted their sense of self, including in the

present. Finally, participants shared their strategies and processes of coping with and resisting internalized racism. Based on this format, I was able to speculate on each participant's relationship to internalized racism over time.

This chapter begins with participants' demographics and is followed by the four major themes presented by participants.

Participant Demographics

Participants were 13 self-identified mono-racial or multiracial Black women in the age range of 18-55. All of the participants had obtained a Bachelors degree, and some held advanced graduate degrees.

The findings are organized into four major themes: internalized racist messages from salient influences, negative impacts on sense of self, impact on interpersonal Black relationships, and methods of resistance and coping. Quotes from interviews are clustered around themes to illustrate the findings. The chapter highlights group similarities and differences and their relation to models of racial identity development.

Participant Themes

Internalized racist messages.

Nearly all participants (n=12) stated that they recently or in the past had negative thoughts or feelings explicitly about being a Black person. The remaining participant (n=1) reported negative feelings related to attributes associated with her race, but denied negative feelings specifically about being a Black person. From literature and my own personal experience as a mixed race Black woman, I understood that the existence of these negative thoughts about race originate from messages received from salient influences in one's life, which may differ for each participant depending on a variety of factors, such as the racial composition

of one's school or neighborhood. Thus, I asked each participant what kinds of messages they received about their race from their families, their schools, and the media.

Family appeared to play a significant role in the lives of participants in this study. Many of the participants' families instilled messages that left permanent scripts for the women. Some of the women felt overwhelmed, motivated, encouraged, empowered and or confused by lessons on race from family. Seventy percent ($n = 9$) of the participants reported feeling empowered and affirmed in their race by their parents and families. Thirty percent ($n=4$) of the participants said that they received negative messages about their race from family members.

Nearly all participants recalled receiving information from their family about racial difference and racial bias that they may likely encounter outside of their families. One major theme involved colorism. During childhood, some dark-skinned women were told that it was undesirable and disadvantageous to have dark skin, and that lighter skin was more beautiful and preferred. One participant recalled "being bombarded by friends and family" with this preference. Even when a Black racial identity was affirmed, messages about colorism remained. Abby explained, "so there's always that idea that Black is nice, but if you are going to be Black, it's better to be a fair-skinned Black girl than a dark-skinned Black girl."

When some participants were inundated with messages about inferiority of their skin color, they saw it as negative but also as a method of adaptation. Parents and grandmothers imparted this messages in order to "warn" these women about the disadvantageous they might face later in life. Along with colorism came the instruction to overcompensate to make up for racial inferiority. Thirty percent of the participants ($n=4$) spoke about feeling that they had to "be better" and "do better" than the average in order to compensate for their marginalized identity. Ellen explained:

I think there's a pressure where you know that you are competing against somebody else, right? Your resumes are equal. You're probably not going to get [the job]. And you have to work harder and be better because this is the way it is. It's not "woe is me", this is just how it is. Because naturally, well I don't want to say naturally, but people gravitate to who they are familiar with.

Ellen identified the pressure to perform well in the area of education and career as a necessary survival strategy as a Black woman facing racism in those systems. However, this adaptation also seemed limiting and connected to internalized racism, as many participants spoke to this common pressure to avoid Black stereotypes to distance themselves from negative perceptions. She also said:

When I started working, people would tell me don't be the "b-i-t-c-h" boss. That's one of the things when I become elevated in my career that I'm going to try actively *not* to be. When you work so hard to get somewhere you can go overboard, so that's a perception I'm going to try and avoid.

Ellen acknowledged in order to avoid being seen as a "bitch" in her law career she must actively try to avoid this label, which may involve changing her behavior or thoughts.

Sixty-nine percent (n= 9) of participants identified beauty standards as a major theme of their experience with internalizing negative messages about being Black from family, school and the media, including associating negative feelings about their hair, body image/weight, and skin color. Vida said:

Coming from a really diverse middle school, I like really wanted to hit puberty, I really wanted hips and curves and to gain weight. And then I went to this [white] high school and I immediately tried to diet, thinking I was too big. So I think I

really internalized that. I viewed women of colors' bodies [...] as a positive and then I switched to setting where it wasn't a positive, and I internalized that. [...] I associated things with my blackness as negative, like I wanted to straighten my hair.

Vida also connected her desire to lose weight as internalized white supremacy: "it feels like I'm adhering to white beauty standards when I want to get in shape and lose weight." Ellen was the second of three participants that linked body image/weight issues to race, stating "when you're the only Black kid, you're also the biggest kid. I always thought I was fat."

The media was identified as a source of racist messaging around beauty standards. She added:

TV? I guess I thought...well my hair is curly, so I guess I always wanted to have straight hair. Just recently we're seeing big curly hair. So I used to always want a relaxer, always want this hair, those type of things. And of course in elementary school I always thought I was obese, so the media probably made me want to be that skinny person.

Devonne contributed:

The dominant white, blonde and thin beauty ideal was all over the magazines and TV shows I absorbed in my adolescence, and that same ideal was very present in my middle and high school. The "popular girls" and, importantly, those accepted and understood to be beautiful were white, blonde and thin. I distinctly remember wishing my nose shape were different. My hair, in particular, was a point of constant stress for me. I would do whatever I could to smooth it down, insisting my mom let me straighten it for every school dance. I wanted to get as close to that beauty ideal as I could. But I knew, not thought, but knew that boys wouldn't

like me because I was black and that, while I was smart, funny and personable, I was definitely not beautiful...singularly because I was not white.

Racial identity development.

When asked about when they became conscious of their racial identity and its meaning, participants seemed to draw some distinction between the two. For many, awareness of their race and racial difference occurred during early childhood, but their ability to make meaning of it varied. Some only knew it meant difference, while others already had an implicit idea of what their identity meant. Sasha shared:

I have a complicated relationship with my father in that he doesn't quite exist [laughs] and um, at some point, I want to say when I was like 7 or 8, he sent me a toy for my birthday and it was like a my size Barbie, one of those giant ones, so it's like the same size as me at the time um and it was a Black doll, and it was the first time I ever had gotten a Black doll, and I didn't like it. And I was like this is ugly why did I get this? And I've never had a Black doll, I don't want a Black doll. And my mom was a little confused, but, also like we couldn't figure out, because I had never expressed any issues about Blackness prior to. And we couldn't quite figure out—I say we as in much later in life, and reflecting back, thinking on... where was this hatred for this Black doll coming from? Was it because my father gifted it to me, is it because he gave me something that was supposed to reflect me, but I was like he doesn't know me therefore it can't reflect me, or is it just because I internalized this racism to such an extent that I literally was like the “doll study” where I was like oh, I don't like Black dolls even though I don't recall ever having any dislike of Blackness.

Other participants linked a positive and political significance of their blackness with their education, and higher education in particular, which will be elaborated on in the last section of this chapter.

Negative impacts on sense of self.

Every participant (n = 13) said that the messages they received from either family, friends, school or the media about their race had some negative impact on their sense of self. Participants listed a myriad of detrimental effects of racism, especially in adolescence, including low-self esteem/self-worth (n= 6) mental health issues (depression, eating disorder) (n = 3), and pressure to avoid stereotypes (n =3), with an overall theme of some racial inferiority. Participants also identified guilt over colorism, feeling tokenized, inability to internalize accomplishments, stereotype threat, and negative body images as other consequences. Devonne said:

The fact that the negative thinking about my body is still present might be partially due to it's having been solidified as an unhealthy coping mechanism for me, or my family's history of mental illness, or the fact that I am a perfectionist and pretty high strung, or that I also struggle with depression. But I truly do feel that while all of those things may have predisposed me to the need to manage some sort of mental health issue long term... that it may NOT have manifested as an eating disorder had I had the opportunity to grow up around more black peers rather than in a space in which the dominant white beauty ideal was, practically, the ONLY beauty ideal.

She understood her mental illness as both related to many factors, but also a racialized issue:

To this day, under stress, I struggle with body image and my relationship to food and as much as I do not consciously endorse this anxious thinking, I do know that my occasional unhealthy focus on my weight, my butt and my hips is one that feels also very racialized to me.

On the impact of internalized racism on her sense of self, Ruby spoke about the ways in which she was unable to be fully herself, as others called her “white” or policed her into fitting into a particular image of Blackness. The impact of racism was so far-reaching and ingrained that Ruby noticed that in her dreams, she imagined herself as a light-skinned person. On internalized racism, she said: “I think what it ends up doing is stripping what Blackness can mean, and what Blackness can look like. For me it was about an erasure of self, and really reinforcing white supremacy”.

Impact on interpersonal Black relationships.

A major impact of internalized racism on participants was present when they spoke of how it affected their relationships with other Black people, and other Black women in particular. These were perhaps the most subjectively painful stories to hear, about women who both rejected others due to internalized bias and yet desperately wanted connection, which only increased their sense of isolation created by racism in the first place.

Participants in this study were asked, “How do messages about race and racism affect your view of others who share your race?” As a researcher, my intent with this question was to explore how internalized racism self-perpetuates by causing Black Women to replicate and project racist messages of behaviors onto other Black women. The participants gave multiple responses, which were divided into categories. Twenty-seven percent (n = 6) of the women in this study acknowledged that messages about race and racism affected their view of others who

share their race and that such views led them to have prejudice towards Black women. However, 22% (n = 5) stated that such messages led them to have attachment and alliance with other Black women. 18% (n = 4) of the women in this study reported they felt the need to separate from other Black women; and 13% (n = 3) reported they held blame towards Black women. Shame towards Black women and Stereotyping towards Black women were 10% each, respectively (n = 2). See Table 1 for percentage distribution.

Table 1. African American/Black Women View of Others Who Share Race

Category	Number	Percentage
Attachment and Alliance	5	22%
Separate from Other Black Women	4	18%
Shame towards Black Women	2	10%
Prejudice towards Black Women	6	27%
Stereotyping towards Black Women	2	10%
Blaming towards Black Women	3	13%
Total Number	22	100%

These findings are complex because many of the critical views expressed by women in this study replicate or mirror the lived racism reported by Black women. The same emotional, social pain, rejection and isolation felt and identified by some of the participants during childhood and adulthood is what they are projecting onto other Black women. This may be because when women feel threatened, isolated or rejected, their first impulse is to withdraw, blame, project or demean the source (Benenson et al., 2011); therefore, if Black women are viewed by other Black women as the cause or reason for their treatment, they are more likely to

have prejudice towards or reject them. By the same token, also as highlighted by 22% of the women in this study, as African American/Black Women grow, mature, or are exposed, their scripts and messages change. For example, Myra described her distancing and negative judgment of Black women as a defense mechanism to preserve a sense of self that has been so harmed by the racism she experienced throughout school:

In high school of course I would say things about other Black women, things that I think, like, if someone was less educated, anything that I wasn't, if there was any way I could put down other Black women, that was the sort of place that I was in, finding ways to raise myself up. I mean its awful, but whether it was around race or class, if that person was not well educated [...] then maybe I would call them ghetto, and that was my way of again, not raising them up, but putting them down. Even now I guess it comes up in more subtle ways.

A few participants elaborated about this pendulum of connection and disconnection; an underlying fear of rejection of other Black women, but the strong desire to have that connection.

Vida said:

I have some sense that there is a separation between myself and a lot of other black people, not one that I want [...] but it makes this space because of the impact of colorism. I think that still impacts my life today, it impacts my relationship with people of color.

Two participants who identified as both Black and multiracial/mixed race also spoke of how they were perceived negatively by their monoracial Black peers, which they felt were divisive. Vida pointed out, "It undercuts my ability to be fully in solidarity with the black community because it affects how I'm seen, or how I assume I'm seen, so it affects how I relate

to other people.” Further factors embedded within internalize racism that participants cited as a source of disconnection among Black communities’ included colorism (light skin preference or privilege) and classism.

Last, participants were reflective on forming romantic relationships and choice in romantic partners as affected by internalized racism. Light skinned women were thought to be both more desirable and more fetishized in the realm of dating. For one participant, critically examining “how and who we love” was a major theme of her experience with internalized racism.

Protective factors.

Despite being negatively impacted by internalized racism on some level, most of the women described protective factors that buffered against the internalization of harmful messages they received about being Black, particularly during childhood and adolescence.

Messages of racial pride. Nine participants reported receiving messages of racial, ethnic or cultural pride from either their families or their schools. One participant also spoke of learning to associate her Black identity with a sense of political responsibility and action.

Positive Black Role models. The presence of positive Black role models in the participants’ social lives or the media was cited by four women as important sources of messages received about their racial identity. Ruby emphasized that “it’s not just about seeing another Black person on screen, its about seeing someone fully realized. It’s seeing someone full and whole and being able to connect with that, and that’s the magic, right? That connection.”

Racially diverse neighborhoods and schools. Participants who attended racially diverse schools in their youth, lived in racially diverse neighborhoods, or had racially diverse friendship

groups said they received less negative messages about their race in these environments.

Methods of resisting, unlearning and coping with internalized racism.

In follow-up to participants' view of others who share their race, participants in this study were asked to elaborate upon whether their perceptions towards others of their race have changed over time and if so, how. One hundred percent (n = 13) of the participants in this study reported that their overall perceptions about their race have changed over time. Each of the participants spoke of heightened 'positive racial identity' and 'increased racial pride'. More than half of the participants shared their development of cultural pride, commitment to social action, and the transition to positive identity development. Education and exposure were consistently the common denominators for change among these participants. Some specific courses were identified by Myra, who spoke of her Education on Race and Racism/Consciousness Raising Course; participant Vida, of her history class on Multiracial Black People; and participant Ruby, who spoke of her Race and Racism course.

Improved relationships with African American/Black Women in high school, college and within communities also made a difference for the women in this study. They reported "wanting a connection", wanting "community building with black people", wanting "relationships", wanting "increased education on race and racism/consciousness raising", and wanting "increased connections with black peers". The following narratives depict some of these expressions. Myra explained:

Now I see a group of Black women and I want to move towards them. I want to be friends. It's almost the opposite of how I felt before. Society tries everything in its power to bring Black women down, and not wanting to be a part of that, put limits around what Black women are and can be.

In addition, Vida shared that “part of it was being able to connect to a historical idea of a multiracial Black person and to be proud of a positive Black and Multiracial identity development.”

These secondary questions led to the study’s research question, “how do African American/Black Women unlearn internalized racism?” Internalized racism, for purposes of this study, was defined as the acceptance of negative, stereotypical or devaluing ideas and beliefs about ones own racial group, and about oneself as a member of that group. Internalized racism for the women in this study addressed how they felt about themselves, and their views of other Black women.

Some women in this study reported intimate familiarity with internalized racism and discriminatory practices contributed to their skin color and features. For example, Ashley, who was light skinned and Vida, also light skin, was clear that her complexion, attached to her multiracial features, allowed her to avoid certain stereotypes within the white community, but not necessarily in Black communities. Other participants with darker skin or Afrocentric features were most noticed and avoided at school. Regardless of their own skin color, the participants in this study spoke extensively about colorism and desirability, attached these to beauty standards, and shared how they had internalized media messages about beauty standards. As previously mentioned, many of the participants in this study seemed to struggle with their self-worth, perceived attractiveness, and overall psychological well being until later adulthood. These messages within the media and beauty standards seem to be a constant in the lives of African American/Black Women in this study.

I asked participants how they coped with and resisted internalized racism in the past and in their current day-to day-life, which elicited a variation of responses uniquely fitting to each participant's experience. Devonne explained:

Having images of, relationships with, and strong narratives of Black women has been central to my coping with internalized racism. I have spent most of my life racially isolated. For much of my life, then, my own family has served as an island like resource for all of the above. As I have gotten older I have more intentionally sought out relationships with other Black women and images and narratives of Black women that validate my experience. The relationship piece has been the most important for me, and not only because being around strong, smart, funny and determined Black women fills my soul and serves as a direct counter to the devaluing messages I get every day as a Black woman.”

“there is the shame that comes with the internal holding of negative beliefs about ones self and ones community. But there is also a particular shame that comes in realizing that I am not above internalizing these messages...the messages themselves are shaming...but the notion that I have somehow failed to keep them from seeping into my own sense of self and personal beliefs of myself also brings me shame...and it is this piece that I am most able to combat and heal through relationships with other Black women.

Myra shared:

Now I see a group of Black women and I want to move towards them, I want to be friends. It's almost the exact opposite of how I felt before. Society tries

everything in its power to bring Black women down, and not wanting to be a part of that, put limits around what Black women are and can be.

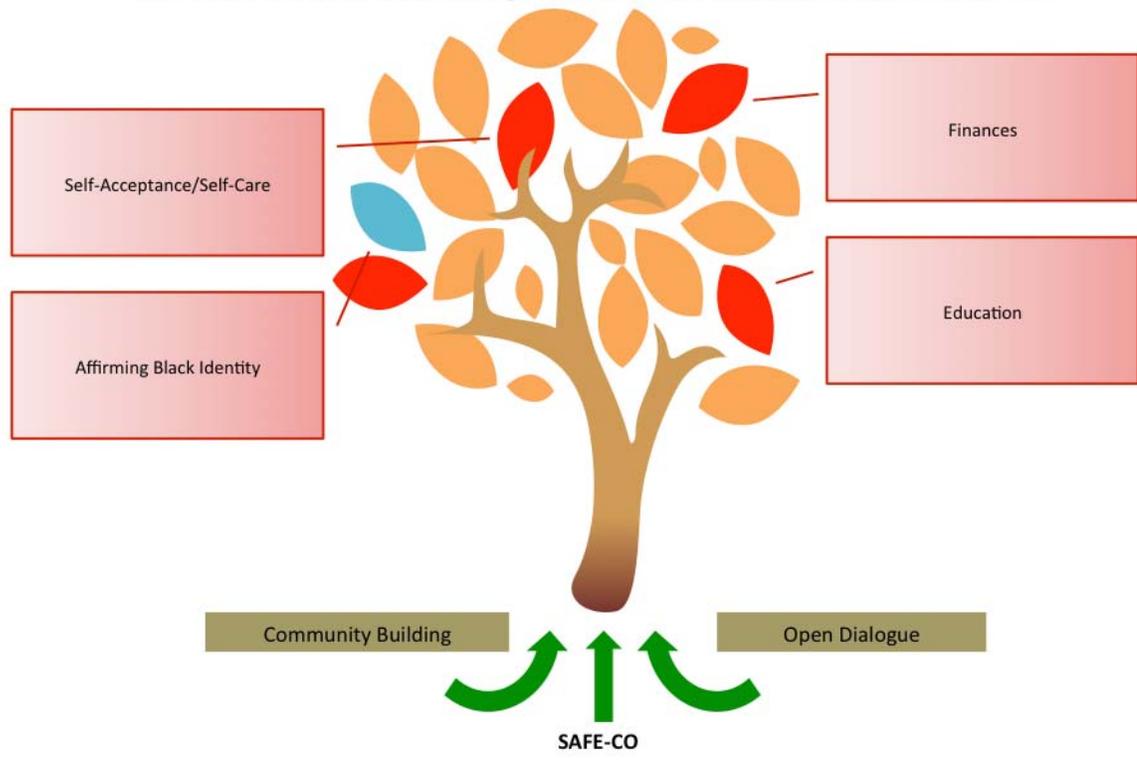
Ruby related coping to working on projects in her personal life, stating, “right now I am working on projects that are meaningful, reminding myself that I’m worth it and I know what I’m doing and I’m confident. Right now it was a lot to do with self-love.”

Yolanda used another strategy to counteract the psychological effects of racism:

Since I’ve been practicing mindfulness, [Racism] is not internalized so much anymore. It’s this screen that others who are prejudiced or racist have projected, or are trying to project onto me. But the screen is no longer inside my body. It’s sort of like I watch it happen, it is generated from them. And so then I can choose to react according to a construct I know about called internalized racism. So the construct is more outside of me.

Overall, participants identified many coping skills such as practicing self-acceptance, general self-care, challenging internalized racism in self and others, affirming Black identities, challenging beauty standards, activism/commitment to Black communities, awareness, finding role models, and building connections with other Black women. The six main ongoing behaviors that helped them to reduce or reject internalized racism within their own lives can be summarized as: (1) Self Acceptance/Self-Care; (2) Affirming Black Identity; (3) Finances; (4) Education; (5) Community Building; and (6) Open Dialogue. Ironically, it is the acronym SAFE-CO, which is presented by the following illustrative growth tree

Behaviors that reduce or reject internalized racism in Black women



These findings did not show that they unlearned internalized racism but did show that they learned how to cope with internalized racism. Acknowledging that internalized racism exists and putting it in the forefront did this. Myra likened this process of coping and resisting as a continuous “growing pain that you don’t grow out of”. She elaborated:

I’ve come such a long way, but now I have the tools to check myself [...] or I have people in my life who will check me [...] but it feels like, as a Black woman, Black girl, I think internalized racism is something that we all experience, whether we know to name it as that or not, it’s definitely a growing pain.

I asked participants what emotions they had when talking and thinking about internalized racism. Sadness (n= 55), anger (n=5) and compassion (n=3) were the most commonly identified

feelings, but shame, vulnerability, feeling burdened, guilty, powerless, and motivated to take action were also identified by the women. Women likened talking about their experiences to “feeling like a kid” again. Creating opportunities for dialogue was one strategy to give voice to these powerful emotions.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

The objective of this qualitative study was to explore the how African American/Black women learn, unlearn and resist internalized racism, i.e. the acceptance of negative and devaluing messages about one's racial identity, and the relationship between internalized racism and racial identity development. Findings from this study are important to understanding and acknowledging how internalized racism impacts the lives of African American/Black women; and it is apparent from this study that internalized racism causes long term behavioral and psychological effects on Black women.

Many of the participants' experiences in this study closely mirrored Beverly Tatum's Black racial identity development model. Also observed was that participant experiences demonstrated a nonlinear process of coping with internalized racism. A variety of factors affected how participants learned to work through internalized racism in their progression towards a healthy, positive sense of Black racial identity.

In this chapter I discuss my key findings by describing: (1) the relationship between internalized racism and literature on racial identity development; 2) implications for clinical practice, 3) implications for theory, 4) recommendations for future research on the inquiry of internalized racism, and 5) "SAFE-CO" for Black women.

Internalized Racism and Previous Literature on Racial Identity Development

All of the participants reported experiencing some level of racism from childhood until the present. Their personal stories reflected internalized oppression, colorism, racism, discrimination, and isolation. Hearing these women's stories reified for me that internalized racism is common to many African American/Black women, and that this is not something that clinicians working with Black women can easily overlook, especially when tasked to help all marginalized populations. Findings from my study are supported by much of the literature.

Manifestations of Internalized Racism

Nearly all of the participants (n=12) in this study stated that they recently or in the past had negative thoughts or feelings explicitly about being a Black person. This finding underscores the pervasiveness of racism. Racism began early for many of the participants in this study, whether they were conscious of it or not. Not one participant showed immunity or freedom from negative messages about their racial identity--messages that they began receiving during childhood. This is consistent with much of the literature. Models of racial identity development suggest that internalized racism is a *natural consequence* of forming identity in a western society in which white supremacist worldviews are embedded in both dominant ideology as well as political, educational, and economic systems of power. Tatum purported that this process occurred in some form in-person (Tatum, 1992) and unfolds in about three-to-four stages in an African American's racial identity development (Cross, 1971, 1978). In other words, the very existence of internalized racism, by its very definition, isn't as much of a result as it is an *expected outcome and self-perpetuating tool* of oppression in society embedded in white supremacy. It became evident through the participant narratives that internalized racism was deeply embedded in the lives of these women in a multitude of contexts.

Findings from this study also add to that body of literature on the impact of colorism and white beauty standards on African American/Black women. Though not the central focus of this study, participant narratives highlighted the specificity of negative beliefs about their racial group surrounding colorism. This seeped into how they understood standards of beauty as valuing light skin and devaluing dark skin.

Psychological Impacts

Current findings support that internalized racism is associated with negative mental health impacts. Participants stated directly that internalized racism impacted their sense of self by leading to low-self esteem and self-worth (n= 6) mental health issues (depression, eating disorders) (n = 3), pressure to avoid stereotypes (n =3), and negative body image, with an overall theme of some racial inferiority. Hardy (2013) research also supported this sense of “internalized devaluation”.

Internalized racial stereotypes are associated with a diminished ability to cope with stress, as individuals cannot rely on a positive self-concept and racial identity as a buffer against discrimination (Carter, 2007), as well as other negative health outcomes such as increased abdominal obesity and dysregulation of cortisol (Tull, 1999; 2005). While participants in this study did not remark upon physical health outcomes, the negative psychological impacts were prevalent.

Many participants reported experiencing stereotype threat throughout their life course as a heightened awareness that their behavior was at risk of being viewed as confirming a negative stereotype about Black people. The existence of stereotype threat has been pervasively studied by Steele & Aronson (1995) as a phenomenon that impairs Blacks’ performance in particular

areas. Participants addressed this issue as pressure to perform better than average, especially in order to compensate against the disadvantage of racism.

Stages of Black Identity Development

Pre-Encounter.

The findings and narratives of this study partially support models of Black Racial Identity Development, which suggest that internalized racism decreases as a positive and secure sense of racial identity emerges over time.

Literature on these models assert that internalized racism is the primary characteristic of the Pre-Encounter stage, during which youth of color soak up negative stereotypes about their race and adopt many of the beliefs and values of the dominant white culture. This is paired with a desire to assimilate and be accepted by whites, or passively distance themselves from other people. This was especially evident among some of the participants who felt negatively towards their race and tried to assimilate their white peers, or those participants who placed themselves above other Blacks in order to feel better about themselves.

All participants describe, to some degree, an acceptance of negative stereotypes about their race/ethnicity and exposure to a white dominant worldview, particularly around standards of beauty. However, internalization of these beliefs and values were largely dependent on the early messages received about race from family, school, and sometimes the media. Participants spoke frequently of gaining an understanding of colorism, an awareness that light skin complexion was preferred and advantageous over dark skin.

The Pre-Encounter stage is also characterized by a low salience of racial identity—this trait varied for most participants. Many participants described a consciousness around their racial identity marked by racial, ethnic and cultural pride, especially when these positive messages

were coming from school and family sources. Findings from my study imply that a variable salience of racial identity is affected by intentional messages about racial identity from significant influences.

However, the Pre-Encounter stage for these women manifested more explicitly in the replication of prejudice against other Black women. More than desiring assimilation to whiteness and white social groups was a deliberate distancing from “stereotypical” Black people based on class, educational level, ethnicity, and distinctions between “good” and “bad” representations of Blackness.

Encounter.

In the Encounter stage, a strong and pervasive message of *unbelonging* spurs growing awareness of the impact of racism on one’s own life. Participants in this study described an awareness of bias and racism from very young ages, as if an awareness of racism was a part of a developmental stage itself, and not an epiphany stemming from a singular discriminatory incident. Some participants recalled growth in their awareness based on memorable experiences of racism in childhood, such as in their friendship groups or schools. However, many came into awareness through educational experiences, in which they could grant a new kind of meaning to these experiences.

Immersion/Emersion.

Participants characterized this stage as a highly positive and significant step in their racial identity development that occurred in reaction to coping with harmful, devaluing messages. They did so by seeking connection with same-race role models in the form of counselors, mentors, and female friendships. When this occurred, less internalized racism was identified in this process. Sites for connection included friendship groups, college, classrooms, sororities, and affinity

groups. Still, some participants mentioned discord with others who did not understand racial issues the same way they did, but attempted to engage those individuals in discussion or challenge their prejudices.

Internalization/Internalization Commitment.

Lastly, the findings supported that commitment to social action in some form - or a general intention to uplift Black people by challenging racism - was a major step of empowerment. Behaviors associated with this stage appeared to be present during different periods of the participants' life course, but most stated that this is how they coped with internalized racism in the present. Such actions included challenging white supremacist beauty ideals, financially supporting Black-owned businesses, mentoring younger children, engaging in projects about racial identity, and creating spaces for dialogue about racism. These are examples of how participants may have translated "their personal sense of Blackness into a plan of action" (2001).

There are also ways in which my participants' narratives, collectively, did not support how internalized racism is conceptualized in racial identity development models. In these models, internalized racism is constructed as a condition to be ultimately overcome. The final stage of Internalization/Commitment implies a lack of internalized racism, but does not account for internalized racism, in its many forms, as present in every stage as the individual encounters new situations, contexts, challenges and histories. In this study, the climb into an "internalization commitment" stage of racial identity development did not, for these participants, necessarily show an absolute defeat of internalized racist beliefs. In fact, most participants stated that they continued to struggle with internalized racism like a "growing pain" at every juncture of their lives. This struggle was framed as an ongoing effort.

And how could they not? If internalized racism is the result of the bombardment of racist conditions, and racism is embedded within every system and institution in the United States, it would be impossible to totally negate internalized racism. However, these women showed a significantly increased ability to cope with and resist internalized racism, heightened consciousness around these issues, and greater agency in resisting negative messages and decreased prejudice towards others. They formed significant and powerful relationships with other Black women who mirrored them. The old defense of internalizing racism and creating “in and out” groups of Black people was mediated by a political understanding of the impact of racism on the self and greater community. Each individual employed her own method of resistance.

The results of this study suggest that resisting and unlearning internalized racism is not measured by its impossible ultimate overcoming, but more accurately about a critical consciousness and challenging of racism in favor of a positive sense of self, commitment to others, and greater connection among Black women.

Clinical Implications

The negative psychological impact of internalized racism as a “hidden wound” of racism was compounded in these findings. Therefore, attention to these issues is of clinical importance for clinicians who seek to work with Black women, and among other people of color. My findings support Watts-Jones (2002) and Tatum(1993)’s assertions that “healing power comes from connection with peers from one’s own racial group”, and that this corrective relational experience is integral in countering the previous internalized negative messages about themselves and other members of their racial group. Facilitating empowerment through the process of racial identity means understanding and valuing the essential power of same-race

relationships that are growth enhancing, particularly in the “Internalization stage”. For one, this may mean critical consideration of the race of the therapist-client dyad, or of clinical groups.

Special attention to the internalization of devaluing messages and their impacts on mental health, as highlighted in these participants’ narratives, is also important, since mental health is racialized for these women.

Limitations of the Study

First, there are several limitations to these data and the interpretations offered. The most glaring limitation is evident in participant demographics. All participants in the study had at least a Bachelors level degree of education, and many also obtained advanced graduate degrees. Therefore, the sample biases a population that has had access to educational privilege. For example, few participants cited certain college courses as catalysts in their positive racial identity development. Furthermore, education and socioeconomic status were cited as factors that heightened divide in Black communities.

In addition, generalizability cannot and should not be assumed given the relatively small sample size (n=13). Participants were recruited mainly from one geographic area, and recruitment also relied on snowball sampling from a small network of individuals who were connected by social circles. Future studies may seek to incorporate a broader and more representative sample of Black women from varying socioeconomic, geographic and educational backgrounds.

Reliability and validity of measurement should also be considered, as interview questions designed by this researcher were subjective, but based on the perceived inadequacy of quantitative measures for the goal of this research. Inevitable subjectivity in this study is

informed by the researcher's own social identities, life experiences, and adherence to theories that utilize a systemic definition of racism.

Recommendations for Future Research

Internalized racism is a pervasive occurrence in our society and a result of larger systems of oppression. Given that each of the African American/Black Women in this study were impacted by varying degrees of internalized racism, research needs expand on this subject area with specific attention to African American women and other groups of color. As stated in both my literature and current literature, internalized racism is well integrated into society and commonly accepted as "business as usual". Yet, as evidenced by this study, there are long-term behavioral and psychological consequences of internalized racism. The role of educators, society and the community-at-large in offering individual, community-based and systemic interventions needs to be examined. In addition, since this subject matter is stigmatized but particularly relevant to Black women (and other groups of color), scholars of color from multiple interdisciplinary fields, credentialed or not, should be especially considered as the most important voices in this area of research.

Because colorism and light skin privilege also appeared to be a major determinant of what kinds of messages and experiences participants faced, future studies may also seek to explore in depth how colorism and anti-blackness can be addressed. Narratives around the intersection of gender and sexuality were not prevalent in these findings. However, attention to the sexual orientation and gender presentation should also be explored in similar samples. One salient example is that among factors that were deemed expressions of internalized racism such as colorism, homophobia or heterosexism was not mentioned.

Implications for Theory

Internalized racism was shown to be both an insidious and expected impact of racism on the psyche, but also a seemingly adaptive response to racist socialization. From the previous literature and the current findings, one can deduce that internalized racism is not only a “hidden wound” of racism, but in some ways a defense against the psychological trauma of a hostile, white supremacist context (Pyke & Dang, 2003). In fact, participants who spoke about colorism recalled that the aim of these messages, often reinforced by family members, was to protect them from racism that targeted dark-skinned Blacks by distancing themselves from that category and alerting them to the risks.

Note the self-perpetuating function: the presentation of internalized racism benefits the dominant group, Whites, who are able to remain ignorant on the subject and are not be held accountable for the problem of internalized racism. One participant raised awareness of this function when she said, “I’m angry that it took me until college to learn that I had to un-train my thinking that beautiful meant white and that white people don’t need to make the effort of digging the racism up out of themselves.” By acknowledging this, theory on internalized racism can take caution not to place the onus of challenging racism solely on the individuals targeted by it.

Conclusion: A Review of SAFE-CO for Black Women.

This study sought to explore how Black women learn, unlearn, and resist internalized racism as they develop a positive sense of racial identity. Participants described the impact of racist messages from family, educational settings, and the media on their sense of self. A major impact of internalized racism was demonstrated through divides within Black social relationships, particularly around colorism, educational and class backgrounds. The women in this study expressed that navigating these relationships and eventually building community with

other Black women was an empowering and liberating piece of their journeys. They also shared their experiences with others and gained committed to some form of activism against racism. These methods helped them gain the power of self-definition over themselves and the meaning of their Blackness. Participants named a variety of creative and wise ways to challenge internalized racism, which holds clinical significance for those who seek to understand and support the authentic experience of Black and African American women in the United States.

Below is a review of how Black women in this study chose to unlearn, cope with, and resist internalized racism:

Self-Acceptance and Self Care. Practice positive affirmations or mindfulness; separate negative messages from one's sense of self. Take care of mental health and have self-compassion. Honor emotional reactions to painful experiences.

Affirming Black identities. Identify with Blackness, in its diverse meanings and forms, with pride. Take action to uplift Black individuals and communities in personal, professional and political life.

Finances. Financially support other Black people and their businesses to combat racism on an economic level.

Education. Increase understanding of the impact of racism and deconstruct dominant white worldviews. Help others challenge negative beliefs about others and themselves.

Community Building. Seek intentional and affirming relationships with other Black women, professional networks, affinity groups. Create spaces where these groups can form.

Open Dialogue. Name internalized racism and speak the experiences into existence to help address the shame, anger, grief or sadness that can render its effects unspeakable.

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Appendix A

Recruitment Letter

Dear _____ ,

My name is Bianca Blakesley, I am an MSW candidate at the Smith College School for Social Work. I am currently conducting a study for my master's degree thesis. I am looking for participants in the greater Boston area who are interested in this study and meet eligibility criteria. I am hoping you can forward this email to members of your [student, church or community] networks.

In my study, I am interested in the processes through which African-American and Black women develop their racial identity and cope with negative messages about their racial identity. The project is titled "African-American and Black Women's Processes of Learning, Unlearning and Resisting Internalized Racism". I hope to interview 15 participants on this topic. Currently, there is little research on how women of color cope with internalized racism. I look forward to sharing more information about the details of this study for anyone interested.

Participants must meet the following inclusion criteria:

- Be over the age of 18 years
- Self-identify as African-American, Black, or mixed race/multiracial/biracial Black
- Self-identify their gender as female, woman, or trans* woman.
- Speak English

All participants in this study will be interviewed for no more than 1.5 hours and will be given the opportunity to enter a drawing to win a \$20 Amazon gift card. If you meet the inclusion criteria noted above, and wish to learn more about the study, please contact me at bblakesley@smith.edu

If you know someone who meets the above criteria and may be interested in participating, I would appreciate it if you would share this with them. .

Thank you for your consideration!

Warmly,

Bianca Blakesley

MSW Candidate

Smith School for Social Work A'16

bblakesley@smith.edu

Appendix B

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the **Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)**



2015-2016

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

Title of Study: African-American and Black Women's Processes of Learning, Unlearning and Resisting Internalized Racism

Investigator: Bianca Blakesley, Smith College School for Social Work(XXX-XXX-XXXX)

.....

Introduction

- You are being asked to participate in a research study on African-American/Black women's experiences of internalized racism (negative and devaluing attitudes about oneself based on race) and its effect on how one comes to view their racial identity
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a self-identified African American or Black or mixed race/multiracial/biracial Black woman over the age of 18
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study is to examine Black women's processes of shedding negative beliefs about their racial identity and how perceptions of their racial identity change over time. This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree. Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following things: you chose to be interviewed individually by the researcher for up to 1.5 hours. The interview will be audio recorded. The interview will take place in person or over Skype depending on the convenience to you.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

Talking about the personal impact of racism in your life may be uncomfortable,

distressing or painful. These are not uncommon reactions to discussing racism. I will be sensitive and responsive to any negative response and will make effort to minimize distress. You can decline to answer any question or even end the interview at any time. I will also provide a list of follow-up supports in the area.

Benefits of Being in the Study

The benefits of participation are having an opportunity to talk about your experience and possibly gaining insights into your own growth and racial identity development. By participating in this interview you will provide information on an understudied area.

The benefits to social work/society are: to provide information for future research and to identify useful information for clinicians to understand about how racism impacts sense of self.

Confidentiality

Your information will be kept confidential. I will be the only person who will know about your participation. The interview will take place either at the researcher's office or at a quiet local coffee shop or another public place of your choice that provides privacy. If you chose a public setting, privacy/confidentiality cannot be guaranteed. Interviews over Skype are also an option. In addition, the records of this study will be kept strictly confidential. I will be the only one who will have access to the audio recording, with the exception of a potential transcriber (someone who creates a written copy of the interview), who will sign a confidentiality agreement.

All research materials including recordings, transcriptions, analyses and consent/assent documents will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. In the event that materials are needed beyond this period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed, and then destroyed. All electronically stored data will be password protected during the storage period. I will not include any information in any report I may publish that would make it possible to identify you.

Payments/gift

By participating in this study you will be offered the opportunity to be entered into a drawing for a \$20 Amazon gift card. The drawing will occur no more than one month after the conclusion of the study. You will still be entered in the drawing if you do not complete the interview.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study at any time up to April 1, 2015 without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point noted below. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study. You must notify me of your decision to withdraw by email or phone by April 1, 2015. After that date, your

information will be part of the thesis and final report.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me at bblakesley@smith.edu or (xxx)xxx-xxxx. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent

Your signature below indicates that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. You will be given a signed and dated copy of this form to keep. You will also be given a list of referrals and access information if you experience emotional issues related to your participation in this study

Name of Participant (print): _____
Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____
Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the **Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)**

.....

1. I agree to be audio taped for this interview:

Name of Participant (print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____ Date: _____

Signature of Researcher(s): _____ Date: _____

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the **Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)**

Appendix C: Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

December 14, 2015

Bianca Blakesley

Dear Bianca,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Elaine Kersten".

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Narviar Barker, Research Advisor

Appendix D

Interview Questions

Key Term: *Internalized Racism* refers to a process in which people of color are conditioned to accept negative, stereotypical or devaluing ideas and beliefs about their own racial group, and about themselves as a member of that group

1. Recently or in the past, have you ever had negative thoughts or feelings towards yourself as a Black person? If so, please share some of your thoughts and how this has impacted you.
2. At what age did you become conscious of your racial identity and its meaning? What feelings did you have about it? Can you share some memorable experiences?
3. What kinds of messages, if any, did you receive about your own racial identity from family, school, media, other? Can you give some examples?
4. What impact, if any, did these messages have on your sense of self?
5. How do these messages about race or racism affect your view of others who share your race?
6. In what ways, if any, have your perceptions about your race changed over time? Has this affected your relationships with others who share your race?
7. Do you think internalized racism impacts your life today and if so, in what way(s)? Can you give some examples?
8. In what ways, if any, do you cope with or resist internalized racism?
9. What feelings do you have when you talk or think about internalized racism?
10. What would you identify as the major themes of your experiences with internalized racism?

Appendix E

Facebook and Social Media Recruitment

RESEARCH PARTICIPANTS NEEDED. Are you a self-identified African-American/Black woman over the age of 18? If so, you are eligible to participate in a study on the processes through which African-American and Black women develop their racial identity and cope with negative messages about their racial identity. The project is titled “African-American and Black Women’s Processes of Learning, Unlearning and Resisting Internalized Racism”. All participants in this study will be interviewed for no more than 1.5 hours and will be entered in a drawing to win a \$20 Amazon gift card. If you or someone you know are interested in participating, please contact me at bblakesley@smith.edu .

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the **Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (HSRC)**

Appendix F
Social Support Referrals List

24-hour Crisis Hotlines

National Suicide Prevention Lifeline 1(800) 273-TALK (8255)

Project Hope Crisis Counseling 1(800) LIFENET (543-3638)

National

Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) National Helpline (a confidential, free, 24-hour-a-day, 365-day-a-year, information service, in English and Spanish, for individuals and family members facing mental health and/or substance use disorders. This service provides referrals to local treatment facilities, support groups, and community-based organizations)
1-800-662-HELP (4357)

Massachusetts

Social Work Therapy Referral Service
<http://www.therapymatcher.org>
617-720-2828

Boston-area Outpatient Services

Boston Behavioral Medicine, 1371 Beacon Street, Suite 304-305, Brookline, MA 02446
(617-232-2435)

Boston Institute for Psychotherapy, 415 Beacon St #120, Brookline, MA 02446
(617) 566-2200

Fenway Health Behavioral Health*, 142 Berkeley St. (4th Floor), Boston MA 02116 South End
(617.927.6202)

The Meeting Point*, 3464 Washington Street Jamaica Plain, MA
(877-207-8479)

*Also specializes in mental health care services for LGBT and gender-non conforming individuals and families