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An overseas example of "lighter is better" : the implications of colorism among male sex workers in Thailand

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, the idea that lighter skin is better than darker skin has been found in many countries and societies. People with light skin were associated with being wealthy enough to remain indoors while people with dark skin were assumed to have attained that skin tone from working outdoors and being exposed to the sun. Colorism is a form of skin color stratification in which light-skinned people are privileged over dark-skinned people, in terms of: access to education, work opportunities, and being perceived as attractive and possessing positive personality traits. European colonialism and slavery reinforced that not only having white skin was ideal, but that European culture was the highest form of culture and should be assimilated by the subordinated societies.

This theoretical thesis aimed to explore how colorism manifested a dichotomization between light-skinned and dark-skinned male sex workers in Thailand. The emergent themes of colorism's impact on self-esteem, self-efficacy, and life outcomes among Thai male sex workers paralleled existing findings of studies done on colorism's effects in the African American community. Within a safe, therapeutic space, social workers are in a position to explore colorism's effects on the internal and interpersonal processes of clients – in particular, clients of color.

AN OVERSEAS EXAMPLE OF "LIGHTER IS BETTER":

THE IMPLICATIONS OF COLORISM AMONG MALE SEX WORKERS IN

THAILAND

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

In many cultures around the world, skin color has been socially constructed to have meanings associated with power, social status, and beauty. Social hierarchies based on skin color differentiation have existed for centuries and continue "to dominate attitudes, behavior, and policies on a global scale so that a tenacious worldview of skin color has been internalized by generations of White people and people of color" (Tummula-Narra, 2007, p. 256). Due to the "colorism" in these cultures, people with lighter skin have experienced institutional and individual privileges more than others with darker skin. Colorism has affected one particular group in Thailand, whose location in society already comes with oppression and stigma: male sex workers. This study will give a brief history of homosexuality and male sex work in Thailand, define colorism and relate it to this specific population, and lastly, discuss the relevance of colorism as a contemporary social issue for clinical social workers.

While there has always been a tacit acceptance of discreet male same-gender sexual encounters and of transgendered male-to-female individuals (also known in Thai as "*kathoey*") in Thailand, Thai men encountered ambivalent feelings when gay male sex work grew in popularity during the latter half of the 20th century. Do these Thai men risk bringing shame to their families if they are discovered pursuing sex work as an occupation because it is seen as a degrading practice? At the same time, male sex work

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has become an expedient source of income – a strong pull factor for young Thai men who want to provide money for their families. The developing commercialization of gay sex tourism in the Thai capital of Bangkok, which sought to capitalize on the increasing number of rich foreigners visiting Thailand, has led to a division between male sex workers along color lines: dark-skinned workers and light-skinned workers.

Concurrently there emerged a demarcation and segregation between the Silom and Surawong districts in Bangkok, with white/European/Western men – or "*farang*" in Thai – beginning to patronize and gentrify the latter district. Gay Thai magazines became imbued with colorist features, reflecting "the existing conditions of social hierarchy and class difference in local gay urban culture" (Suwatcharapinun, 2005, p. 299). According to Suwatcharapinun's interpretation of Thai academic writer Narupon Duangwises, after the first generation of gay Thai magazines from 1982-1988, the type of models in the magazine shifted from tan and darker-skinned to lighter-skinned Thai men.

Magazines and media started to decrease their images of the tall, dark, and handsome "*Thai* style", which is also referred to as the "*Isan* look," to the "*tee*" style. The *Isan* look references a region of Northeast Thailand that is primarily rural and is described in an excerpt of a gay Thai newsletter called *Thai Guys* as, "… so beautiful, brown, smooth and the hair, his hair is fantastic, falling gently over his eyes, so black, but like a raven, shiny black – amazing color black" (Suwatcharapinun, 2005, p. 311). The *tee* style is derived from a Chinese term for younger brother, and it is used to describe someone who looks half Chinese, half Thai due to having fair skin. Furthermore, the additional implications to looking *tee* is that it implies being from a wealthy family and being educated, whereas the *Isan* look is attached to images of being poor and

uneducated. Similar to other Southeast Asian countries, this is due to the historical meanings associated with skin tone – with dark skin as a signifier of outdoor work and farm work, and light skin as a signifier of having enough wealth to stay indoors. Moreover, the influence of European colonialist forces solidified these notions of colorism in Asia, in which the paradigm defined whiteness as the ideal standard of culture and beauty.

Gay magazine editors had shifted the look of their models from the *Isan* look to the *tee* look in order to appeal to the rising market of upper-, middle-class gay Thai men and their trendy lifestyle. As Bangkok's Silom area became a haven for upper-, middle-class gay Thai men, magazines started to become increasingly explicit and pornographic. This commercialization of their models infused a capitalistic tone into gay male sex work. This specific socioeconomic cross-section of gay Thai men sought to distance themselves from their lower-class Thai counterparts through their aforementioned exodus from the Surawong area. This division among the Thai male sex worker population solidified during the end of the 1990s, with the emergence of a new medium to promote gay tourism: Thai gay newsletters (Suwatcharapinun, 2005).

Certain literature, such as *Thai Guys*, aimed for a gay *farang* audience while others, like *Max Magazine* and *Bangkok Variety*, targeted upper-, middle-class local gay men and Asian tourists. On account of this differentiation, upper-, middle-class Thai/Asian men maintained their dominant socioeconomic class status by patronizing lighter-skinned sex workers, while not having to compete with the more wealthy *farangs,* who tended to seek out the more exotic, darker-skinned workers. Furthermore, upper-middle-class Thai patrons may have felt that the *tee* look was much more dignifying than

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the lower-class *Isan* look. Newsletters had been also used as a medium for the commercial sex business to advertise and promote their models, whose attractiveness was socially constructed based on skin color and then assigned characteristics relating to their social and socioeconomic statuses.

Issue of attractiveness and life outcomes; issue of self-esteem and self-efficacy

Motivated to acquire money and improve their economic situation, many *Isan* men have migrated to Bangkok and found their look to be in demand in the *farang*-dominated Surawong area. Sex work in the gay commercial sex business became an accessible vehicle for *Isan* men to cultivate their capital. Other employment opportunities, such as construction, had not paid nearly as much as commercial sex work. This could be a confirmation of studies done in North American and in Asia on the discrepancy of life outcomes found among people of different levels of attractiveness, in which respondents overwhelmingly deemed light-skinned people (especially women) more beautiful and handsome than darker-skinned people. Furthermore, lighter-skinned people have also had higher levels of educational attainment, better job opportunities, and higher levels of self-esteem (Thompson and Keith, 2001). This issue is pertinent to the *Isan* sex worker population as well. An editor of *Thai Guys* shared in an interview that because *Isan* men are from a lower class, they are not viewed as attractive or desirable – gay *farangs*, on the other hand, appreciate their dark features (Suwatcharapinun, 2005). It is assumed that *farangs* typically associate tan skin with a "gay tropical paradise" which is not accessible in their home countries. Moreover, in Western countries, access and ability to go sun-tanning have been construed as signs of being from an upper-class, well-off background.

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Having tan skin appeared to socialize and possibly facilitate the resignation to one's place in society for young Thai men. The advice columnist for *farang*-aimed *Thai Guys* magazine, whose pen name is "Connie Lingus," explained in a column that, "'if (a young Thai man) happens to come from Northeast Thailand and his skin turns a gorgeous shade of chestnut in the sun, he is damned'" (Suwatcharapinun, 2005, p. 314). The columnist continued to note that in the Thai social order, this same young man is on the lowest rung of the ladder. That the *farang* symbolizes social/status ascendancy resonated with Thompson and Keith's 2001 study that skin tone has affected black women's sense of self-efficacy (defined as a person's attitude toward undertaking challenges and succeeding) and self-esteem. Similar to the *Isan* men, dark-skinned black women may encounter feelings that they do not possess positive attributes on account of their skin tone, and consequently, they cannot make a contribution to society, regardless of their intelligence or educational attainment (Thompson and Keith, 2001). For *Isan* men and black women, such internalized thoughts can have a drastically insidious effect – both groups may attribute failures in their lives (for example, educational and work-related) at least partly due to their skin tone. Moreover, since skin tone is a rather stable, discredited identity characteristic, a lack of mastery over outcomes may continue throughout their lives.

Another factor that could be explored between these two groups is the effect of socioeconomic status. For dark-skinned black women who have high levels of income, they have positive levels of self-esteem, similar to that of lighter-skinned black women of the same income bracket (Thompson and Keith, 2001). Would there perhaps be a positive correlation for *Isan* men who acquired a higher socioeconomic status through the

marketability of his skin tone among the *farang* population in Thailand? How does skin

tone affect the feeling of self-efficacy among male sex workers? Would they experience

discrimination based on colorism? How does the collectivist culture influence the

individual *Isan* male sex worker – for example, does he feel obligated to remit earned

money to his family? This thesis will explore these intersections of colorism with

attractiveness, occupational opportunity, self-esteem, and self-efficacy.

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Implications for psychotherapy and social work

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The issues *Isan* male sex workers face speak to a greater need for discussions on

colorism's impact on individuals throughout the world who are dark-skinned. For

therapists and social workers in the U.S., we can help our clients begin to feel

comfortable and share their thoughts on race, ethnicity, and skin color, even if it may

seem politically incorrect in a society that espouses colorblindness and equal opportunity.

At the same time, they cannot make the assumption that all clients of color have felt their

racial/ethnic background to be salient when they begin treatment; clinicians need to

discern on an individual basis if this issue is pertinent to each of our clients. By

broaching the topic of colorism as a possible issue to be explored in therapy, clinicians

inform clients that such a discussion would not be taboo in this setting. One example a

South Asian therapist suggested as an intervention is to inquire about clients' early

experiences of skin color, and their relevance in their family systems, economic and

educational social environments (Tumuula-Narra, 2007). But would it be culturally

appropriate to "introduce" this notion of colorism if, hypothetically, interviewees did not

find it relevant? Then again, what is his opinion when he notices that light-skinned

people ubiquitously present in magazines, media, and TV are the ones who are deemed as

the standard of beauty?

CHAPTER II

HOMOSEXUALITY IN THAILAND

Homosexuality and male same-sex relations have had an implicit presence in Thailand's history. These concepts are heavily influenced by Thai culture's view of sex/gender categories. Unlike the Western view that there are only men and women, Thai culture recognizes a third sex, "*kathoey,*" or transgender, particularly those who identify as male-to-female. In this dynamic, the opposite of the Thai male is the *kathoey*, and not the Thai female, with the *kathoey* representing an absence of masculinity. This is not to be conflated with femininity (Jackson, 1995).

While masculinity is closely associated to being heterosexual in the West, gender and sexual identity are not as rigidly connected in Thailand. The presence of *kathoeys* as a third sex subverts the "masculine/feminine" and "man/woman" binary system found in Western countries – in Thailand, sexual orientation is not fixed and rigid. These notions of eschewing characteristics of the *kathoey* and identifying with the masculinity of being a man (also referred to as being a "complete man") have been central to the burgeoning Thai gay identity construct over the past few decades. Slightly related to the "straight-acting" gay man in the U.S., if a Thai man identifies as a "complete man" who engages as the penetrative agent in same-sex relations, he would still maintain his masculinity while *kathoeys* would be located in the realm of emasculation. This is further informed by the overarching concept that "male sex/categories are not fixed" (Jackson, 1995, p. 274), with expectations of gender performances not as rigid compared to the West.

The increase in tourism, economic development, and tension between traditional Thai values and "influx" of Western views directly influenced the specific subject of male sex work within Thai gay identity development. Contrary to the belief that homosexuality was recently "introduced" as a Western idea, however, male same-sex interactions have not been a new phenomenon in Thailand. For heterosexual Thai males, extramarital affairs "have significant social acceptance, although not always approved in Thailand, and these can also include sexual relations with other men" (Jackson, 1995, p. 222). This logic is partly based on the lack of social and cultural sanctions against men who have sex with female sex workers. Thai women have been expected to acquiesce to their husbands' philandering, since it is in the nature of men to fulfill their sexual needs if their wives cannot satiate this carnal hunger (Morrison, 2006). In fact, it is more shameful to women if their husbands have extra-marital sex with a colleague or peer, than a sex worker. Similar to the "down low" phenomenon of men who sleep with men (MSM) in the U.S., a married or self-identified heterosexual Thai man can therefore justify his sexual affairs with other men as a means to satisfy his high libido.

In other cultures this sexual dynamic is also tacitly tolerated, as long as the heterosexual man is the penetrating, active agent with his partner being the receiving, passive agent. In the 1960s-1970s, male same-sex interactions in Thailand mostly revolved around "cruising" for discreet sexual encounters in public venues, such as parks and movie theaters. Freelance street workers also became present on the scene during this decade. During the 1970s, the Vietnam War brought U.S. soldiers to Southeast Asia, with tens of thousands heading to Bangkok as a rest-and-relaxation destination. Due to

this increase in potential sex tourist patrons, the Patpong area in Bangkok and the nearby Pattaya city became developed as gay red-light districts.

The early to mid-1980s brought cultural and social shifts to the gay "lifestyle" in Bangkok. More gay men began living more openly, creating gay social networks, and patronizing the city's first gay discos and saunas. Although initially most self-identified gay Thai men "were urban-dwelling, educated members of the middle or upper class," the importance of this factor as a determinant of gay identity began to decline in the 1990s, as more men migrated from the countryside villages (Jackson, 1995). It is perhaps more accurate to say, however, that the nascent gay subculture attracted poor, rural men more as a source for work than an opportunity for sexual identity exploration. Furthermore, unlike the West, there is no automatic assumption that working in a gay venue or as a male sex worker means one is gay; most actually identify as heterosexuals who are in relationships with women.

A 1978 Thai law prohibited dancing in venues unless the owners possessed a license, which at the time, was very difficult to obtain. Contrary to the Western template of clubs as social venues, Thai gay discos and clubs adopted the Thai heterosexual sex work institution as their model by establishing go-go dancing and "off" fees. Off fees are the cut of money the bar collects when a patron takes a dancer or sex worker home and thus, "off" the premises. This set-up has "historically been organized to meet the sexual needs of (heterosexual and gay Thai) middle-class men" (Jackson, 1995, p. 237). While most patrons who solicit male sex workers have been Thai men, tourists had also begun to comprise a percentage over time. The structure of these gay venues thus facilitated an

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emphasis on monetary-based transactional sex, rather than functioning as a meeting place for socializing and dating.

In conjunction to the high demand for sex work and the lure of money, other factors motivate young Thai men to become a sex worker, even for a short period of time. As part of Thai cultural expectations, men are expected to help and support their parents, especially if they come from a lower- or working-class background. Parents may also turn a blind eye to their son's pursuit of sex work, as long as he eventually gets married to a woman and has children. Furthermore, Thai men are not hampered by the same degree of overwhelming shame, stigmatization, and homophobia found in the West. As mentioned before, Thai men are capable of self-identifying as heterosexual and masculine while engaging in sexual relations with other men because gender identity and sexual identity are not related. Young Thai men who pursue sex work as an occupation could allay their parents' fears and disapproval (assuming they have found out) by referring to the fluid nature of sexuality and reassuring them that he would eventually marry a woman after building up a nest egg.

In the late 20th century, however, notions of a gay sexual identity have infiltrated Thailand due to a variety of sociocultural factors and emergent gay media. For instance, while not having a political or activist agenda, gay Thai magazines and advice columns offered a space for validation and normalization to men who were attracted to other men. The periodicals answered readers' questions about sex and relationships and identity, held a positive view of gay identity development and self-acceptance, and received most funding from gay bars' advertising. The economic boom and tourism business of Thailand led to increased exposure to Western views. For gay Thais, this meant they

could begin to explore their same-sex attraction and then possibly incorporate this sexual

identity as a part of their own self-concept. In the past, any sort of gay identity was

reduced to same-sex casual sexual encounters and did not validate same-sex romantic

love between partners. Unlike the Western activist history of the gay rights movement,

however, "gayness in Thailand is… a cultural movement, not a political one" (Jackson,

1995, p. 267). As it becomes more industrialized and Westernized in the 21st century,

Thai society faces a cultural bind. Will it acknowledge homosexuality among Thais as a

valid form of identity, and that gay tourism can benefit the economy? Or will it resist the

growing voice of lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender/queer Thais and prefer to relegate

homosexuality back to a taboo, discreet, and informally accepted norm?

Instead of direct lobbying and advocating for new ideas, such as gay rights, in

general, Thais pragmatically try to appropriate new ideas so that they fit with Thai norms

and traditions. Thais perceive clamoring one's unconventional views in an aggressive,

rock-the-boat fashion as lacking integrity and authority. The arrival of a few out gay

Thai men in the late 20th century – Pan Bunnak, Dr. Seri Wongmontha, and Natee

Teerarojjanapongs – helped influence the cohabitating notion "that being gay and being

true to Thai cultural values (family solidarity and social responsibility, for example) were

not incompatible, presenting a vision of gay men as an accepted and integral part of Thai

society" (Jackson, 1995, p. 255). But is it necessary for gay Thai men to come out

publicly, or is such an assertion of individuality more of a Western concept? For a

number of gay Thai men, being a *kunla-gay*, as coined by Teerarojjanapongs, is enough.

Kunla-gay translates into being a socially upright gay person who adheres to Thai values,

makes positive contributions to society and rejects promiscuity (Jackson, 1995).

Therefore, the *kunla-gay* may not feel public self-disclosure is warranted.

Admittedly, this cultural shift has not been met without resistance. Vestiges of homophobia may have also been inherited from the West's influence. In the 1980s, Dr. Wanlop Piyamanotham claimed that homosexuality was eroding traditional Thai values. Parroting hate-mongering messages as found in the U.S. during the AIDS epidemic of the 1990s, Piyamanotham explained that *kathoeys* were "perverted," and that "gayness" was simply a passing mood which seduced youth with its attractive lifestyle (Jackson, 1995). On the other hand, in Thailand, the exposure to the AIDS panic led to the positive effect of more "public acceptance of gayness in the 1990s," once the gay population was exonerated as the main vectors of the disease (Jackson, 1995).

The negotiation of the previous "down-low," secretive nature of male same-sex relations with the contemporary notion of gayness as an identity and a form of masculinity locates the late 20th century, early 21st century gay Thai man in a tenuous position. Does he marginalize his sexuality in order to save face, as well as conform to pressure to have a family? And if he does have same-sex desires, should he fulfill those sexual needs discreetly? Thai men's extra-marital affairs with female sex workers have inadvertently resulted in infecting their wives with HIV and/or sexually transmitted infections – the results from liaisons with male sex workers may be no different (Morrison, 2006). Does the Thai man alleviate this anxiety by validating his gayness as an authentic part of his identity at the risk of bringing shame to his family and defying cultural norms because of this choice?

For gay Thai men who come from a lower-class background, does sex work become a contemporary means to explore their latent feelings of same-sex attraction while ostensibly rationalizing it as a form of economic support for the family? For others who identify as heterosexual, are they "gay for pay" and simply view the work as something that does not significantly impact their sexual identity? While identity politics is a new development among Thailand's current gay population, the overarching issue that remains to be scrutinized is that sex work's structure is inherently laden with unequal power dynamics – in terms of class and racial/cultural differences between the client and Thai worker.

CHAPTER III

BACKGROUND ON COLORISM

I propose that the notion of colorism affects and influences the Thai male sex work context. I will be defining colorism as "the preference for and privileging of lighter skin and discrimination against those with darker skin," and the use of skin color as symbolic capital which can enhance or detriment's one life chances (Glenn, 2008). For Thai male sex workers, this translates into a demarcation between fairer-skinned, Chinese-looking men and darker-skinned, tan-colored men. Thai patrons view the first group as more handsome, desirable, and "upper-class looking," while the latter group is associated with being poor, uneducated, and from the rural areas. Therefore, do fairer-skinned male sex workers have a more advantageous status than their darker-skinned counterparts in the sex work industry? At the same time, do tan-colored men have an advantage because they are seen as desirable to European men? I will provide a brief historical background of colorism that will inform and explain its relevant significance to Thai male sex workers.

Colorist standards have existed in Asia, Southeast Asia, and India for centuries; this mentality of "lighter is better" is strongly embedded and continuously reinforced in these countries. While colonialism contributed to colorist standards because of its guiding assumption that the white, European race is intellectually, culturally, and genetically superior than other races, the idea of lighter skin as a desirable trait had existed long before the European colonialist period. In India, skin color was directly

associated with social status – light-skinned people were wealthy enough to remain in their domiciles away from the sunlight while dark-skinned people's tan color was perceived as a result of working outdoors in the fields. In the East Asian countries of Japan, China, and Korea, white skin had been historically idealized. As far as the Meiji period of the 1860s, for example, Japanese men and women of higher classes wore white-lead powder. The influence of colonialist forces solidified these notions of colorism, and they have persisted through the 21st century. It must also be noted that colorism has not just been a phenomenon which has affected Asian countries only, but it has also permeated globally.

During the period of slavery within American society and the era of the Western empires, non-White people internalized the myths of White superiority, and in a defensive reaction known as the "identification with the aggressor," adopted White standards of beauty and value (Sahay and Piran, 1997). For African-American slaves, colorism manifested in the form of favoritism shown toward light-skinned blacks over dark-skinned blacks, which has been mostly due to the fact that many light-skinned slaves were the kin of their slave owners. Examples of this favoritism included the allowing of fair-skinned blacks to work inside the house, instead of out in the fields, and the accessibility to education and learning skilled trades. Following the Emancipation, the relationship between skin color and status for black people declined but did not disappear, with the black middle class' make-up consisting of "antebellum black elite of favored slaves and ex-slaves whose lighter skin was a status resource" (Hughes and Hertel, 1990, p. 1106).

Throughout the 20th century, light-skinned blacks identified more with middle-class white culture and values. Studies on black students also revealed that light-skinned blacks were valued over than darker-skinned blacks. Furthermore, black children favored light skin over dark skin, and black students thought that light-skinned blacks had more access to opportunities for status enhancement than those with dark skin (Hughes and Hertel, 1990). One study conducted in 1980 using data collected from the National Survey of Black Americans analyzed a representative sample of African-Americans. It examined skin color's relationships with the socioeconomic status and the degree of racialized identity of the subject and their partner. Questions about racialized identity included references to the respondents' identification with black culture and black separatism. The study found that light-skinned blacks have "greater education, occupational prestige, personal income, and family income than those with darker skin" (Hughes and Hertel, 1990, p. 1109).

In terms of black consciousness, the study actually concluded that socioeconomic status differences among black Americans had more of an impact in this area than skin color variation. Nevertheless, it is the light-skinned black population which has been attributed historically and contemporarily with having a higher socioeconomic status. Because of this association with upper-class status, light-skinned blacks' skin tone has become a form of social capital that has made them attractive and desirable partners in the black community. Due to the U.S.'s historical paradigm that blacks are inferior to whites, light-skinned blacks may experience – on an unconscious level – social advantages to being closer to being, or even passing as, white. In the workplace, for example, light-skinned blacks may be seen as more competent than dark-skinned blacks.

In terms of African-Americans' educational attainment, though, skin color has had declining effects in this area throughout the 20th century. Because of the contemporary positive correlations between light skin color and life chances and opportunities within the African-American community, it can be concluded that colorism has been intertwined with much of U.S. history, dating back to the times of slavery.

Other non-Asian countries were not immune to colorism's effects throughout history. Perhaps the predecessor and catalyst to its version in the U.S., colorism in the African continent itself was just as pernicious. The imposition of the white supremacy ideology during the period of European colonialism in Africa also brought forth the "association of Blackness with primitiveness, lack of civilization, unrestrained sexuality, pollution, and dirt" (Glenn, 2008, p. 284). During colonial times in South Africa, Africans desired to become racially mixed or "coloured" since native people encountered more legislative discrimination. Other colonizing forces also used a similar paradigm of racial supremacy over their targeted populations. In Latin America, Spanish colonists believed that a light skin tone denoted beauty and cleanliness, whereas dark skin equated ugliness and a tainted being. European-looking, light-skinned people mostly comprised the Latin American elite, while the poor, rural class was made up of dark, indigenous-looking people. In Mexico, this division on the basis of skin tone generated the concept of the *mestizaje*: "through racial and ethnic mixing, Mexico would gradually be peopled by a whiter 'cosmic race' that surpassed its initial ingredients" (Glenn, 2008, p. 293). Even in North America and Europe, white women in particular have been experiencing a contemporary desire to be light, blemish-, and wrinkle-free. While the period from the mid-1920s until 1940s brought forth the explosive trend of tanning as a symbol of luxury

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and high class, the 1980s discovery of the harmful effects of UV rays has led whites to pursue skin lightening. This regressive theme of tanning reflected a previous mindset of early 20th century South and Eastern European women who had sought to acquire white skin. For these women, light skin represented "gentility, social mobility, Anglo-Saxon superiority, and youth" (Glenn, 2008, p. 295). From these examples it is clear that colorism has had significant global and historical impact.

In terms of Asian countries specifically, colorism's effects included indoctrinating Asian people with a hierarchical sense of beauty, class, and level of education based on one's perceived skin color. In India, as the English became viewed as the "the highest culture and… the optimum physical type" (Glenn, 2008, p. 289), light-skinned Indian men and women were respectively seen as smart and beautiful. On the other hand, dark-skinned men were viewed as emasculated and stupid, whereas dark-skinned women were deemed unattractive. Unlike their male counterparts, however, dark-skinned Indian women's skin tone represented a serious detriment to their future marriage prospects – heterosexual men preferred a light-skinned woman to a dark-skinned woman. In other parts of the world, choosing a light-skinned partner over a dark-skinned partner was not always an available option. In the Philippines, intermarriage between dark-skinned indigenous people and Spanish colonists was unavoidable. Nevertheless, Filipinos who were fair-skinned or "mestizo-looking" had more social advantages compared to darker Filipinos. For instance, "the business and political elites have tended to be disproportionately light skinned with visible Hispanic and/or Chinese appearance" (Glenn, 2008, p. 290). So as light skin began to be associated with better life outcomes – positive marriage prospects, the perception of being from the upper class, and identifying

with the standard of what is physically attractive and beautiful – a significantly increasing number of Asian people over time sought means to whiten their skin, particularly through skin lightening products.

Viewed as the legacy of colonialism being capitalized by multinational and Western consumer culture (Glenn, 2008), skin-lightening companies have proliferated in massive amounts to address this demand, whose customers are overwhelmingly women. Entrepreneurs and businesses throughout history had exploited darker-skinned people's drive to acquire lighter skin. In African American history, references of black women using skin lighteners date as far back as the 1850s, with advertising for these products appearing in African American periodicals in the 1880s and 1890s. These advertisements claimed that black people could lose their dirty look through the products' cleansing process. Contemporary black women have expressed on Internet forums that they do not want white skin per se, but lighter skin, as exemplified by African American Hollywood celebrities like Halle Berry and Beyoncé Knowles.

Although Filipinos in the Philippines and overseas diasporic communities have had a fascination with Western fashion and cosmetics (Glenn, 2008), it is not the Americans or Europeans who have the ideal skin color. Unlike the African American community, Filipinos find skin fairer than Europeans to be more desirable; Japanese, Korean, and Chinese celebrities typically embody the "right" amount of lightness. Current trends in Asia have further shown that the use of whitening products is not slowing down anytime soon. China's and Korea's companies have soon been growing in faster rates compared to the Japanese market. A 2007 Nielsen report also stated that if money were no object, 53% of Korean respondents would use whitening products,

compared to 26% of the Chinese respondents, 23% of the Hong Kong and Taiwanese respondents, and 21% of the Japanese respondents (Glenn, 2008). India outclasses these other countries since it constitutes the largest market for skin lighteners (Glenn, 2008).

Multinational companies, coupled with the mass media, have greatly enhanced the socialization that "lighter is better." Ponds sponsored the Miss Femina India Pageant with the slogan, "Be as beautiful as you can be" (Glenn, 2008, p. 297). If pageant winners are the indicator of the standard of Indian beauty, then being beautiful means being light-skinned. The ubiquity of TVs, computers, and print ads bombard this message incessantly within Asian populations. In one Indian commercial, a father laments that his daughter did not have a good job, nor a husband, while in a Malaysian commercial, a young college student remained unnoticed by her crush. Attributing these problems to their skin color, the women then used skin lightening products which resulted in both situations improving. These commercials problematize dark skin and may "actually be creating a need (for skin lightening products) by depicting having dark skin as a painful and depressing experience" (Glenn, 2008, p. 298).

By consolidating resources with biotechnological, cosmetic, and pharmaceutical corporations, multinational companies have also promoted dark skin as akin to a disease, and the power of science (legitimized through images of doctors and skin cell computerized images) can be harnessed to eradicate dark skin or dark spots. Despite the risks with certain whitening products – there have been reported cases of mercury poisoning of users around the U.S.-Mexico border towns – the enticing promise of being clean, "First World"-like, and upwardly mobile, is extremely difficult to resist, especially for women all around the world. For Thai male sex workers, colorism produces

assumptions about their socioeconomic and educational background, and it also sets the

standards for their desirability and attractiveness.

CHAPTER IV

THAI MALE SEX WORK AS AN EXEMPLAR OF COLORISM

The commercialization of male sex work in Thailand, coupled with the country's

less stringent stigmatization of homosexuality compared to Western standards, has led to

a proliferation of male-bodied images in gay pornographic magazines, newsletters, and

Internet media from the 1980s until the present. As mentioned before, gay Thai

magazines from 1982 to 1988 shifted their standards of beauty in order for male models

"to reaffirm what it means to be 'gay' and to reinforce the different representations

between higher-class and lower-class local gay men" (Suwatcharapinun, 2005, p. 290).

This differentiation between low-class and high-class gay men primarily manifested in a

dichotomization of images along color lines – with the former being associated the

darker-skinned *Isan* men and the latter with lighter-skinned *tee* men. Not only did this

exemplify colorist standards which consigned darker-skinned men to a low-class identity

while elevating lighter-skinned men's social status, but it also implied a sense of the

evolving image of the gay Thai male, as Suwatcharapinun (2005) explained:

> In other words, the '*tee*' look and the '*Isan*' look can be understood as
> categorizations of local gay men operating not from gendered sexual identities but
> from class differences, that is the '*tee*' look represents a 'new' image of 'upper-
> middle-class' local gay men, whereas the '*Isan*' look represents (the) 'old' image of
> 'lower-class' local gay men. (p. 291)

So how exactly did this shift in preference for lighter-skinned over darker-skinned Thai

men in gay media and sex work occur?

Suwatcharapinun (2005) argued that the change from the *Isan* look to the *tee* look as a way of representing male models (in gay Thai magazines and newsletters), as noted by Duangwises, is the result of focusing on the rising market of upper-middle class gay men and their urban lifestyle. This trend was exemplified in Bangkok, as the gay areas of Silom and Surawong became increasingly segregated between upper-class Thai men and *farang*/European/white men, respectively, through the late 20th century. These upper-middle-class gay Thai men were "influenced by the dominant image of lower-class Thai men produced through the binary opposition between '*farangs*-higher' and 'locals-lower'" (Suwatcharapinun, 2005, p. 301). By disassociating from the centralized gay area of Surawong, also known as "Boys' Town," and unsubscribing from the *Isan* look as the male sex worker standard of beauty, gay upper-middle-class Thai men were able to maintain their social status in Thai society, without it being compromised by the historically, institutionally more powerful *farang* population visiting or living in Bangkok. The paradigm of colorism informs and rationalizes this division between the Silom and Surawong areas.

Despite the rejection from upper-middle-class gay Thai patrons and their light-skinned *tee* sex worker counterparts, darker-skinned sex workers may have a commercial advantage since their look "still dominate(s) many gay *farangs*' sexual fantasies" (Suwatcharapinun, 2005, p. 311). Bar and venue owners commodify this look in order to attract wealthy *farang* patrons who may not initially associate dark-skinned workers with being poor and uneducated. Instead, the *Isan* look encapsulates the tropical look Westerners exotify. An editor of a gay magazine, *Thai Guys*, which is aimed at a *farang* audience explained that many gay *farangs* are from countries where having tan skin is

conflated with being wealthy, luxurious, and able to relax in the sun. These dark-skinned

men are part of the gay tropical paradise of Thailand *farang* visitors seek to enjoy while

on vacation. With the image of the *Isan* or dark-skinned man attracting the attention of

gay *farangs*, magazine editors and venue owners exploit this foot-in-the-door by weaving

in socio-economic and altruistic elements into the initially transaction-based dynamic.

By publishing photos of positive relationships between gay *farangs* and *Isan* men in

magazines like *Thai Guys*, editors depict a win-win situation. Gay *farangs* can help these

vulnerable men from disadvantaged backgrounds (poor, uneducated), as well as enjoy the

companionship of an "exotic" man in a tropical country. For the *Isan* sex worker, the

farang customer embodies an opportunity to improve his social and socioeconomic

status. Since employment opportunities for poor and uneducated Thais pay low wages,

such as construction jobs, many *Isan* men from rural areas migrate to Bangkok with the

understanding that their look is in demand in the gay spaces that are *farang*-dominated.

Despite the colorist implications that come with being dark-skinned, in addition to the

dismissal from upper-middle-class gay Thais, *Isan* sex workers are the standard of beauty

for *farangs* – this attractiveness, in turn, can reify as positive life outcomes.

Anderson, Adams, and Plaut (2008) have shown in their study that a person's

attractiveness may significantly affect a person's life outcomes through tangible and

intangible results, particularly in a "voluntaristic" (independent), compared to an

"embedded" (interdependent) cultural context. The notion of physical attractiveness

stereotyping (PAS) – "the tendency to evaluate physically attractive people more

positively than physically unattractive people" (Anderson et al., 2008, p. 352) – is

prevalent in Western countries where romantic relationships are typically based on

personal choice. PAS is exemplified in a study on attractiveness where respondents claimed that attractive people would "experience greater overall happiness, obtain more prestigious jobs, have better marriages, and lead more satisfying social and professional lives than would their unattractive peers" (Anderson et al., 2008, p. 353). In contrast to the premium put on physical attractiveness in Western countries, collectivist countries throughout the world may base a relationship or marriage union on the compatibility between particular kinship groups or families. In these societies, roles, family connections, and group identity are more important and crucial factors which eclipse the need for physical and sexual attraction between prospective partners. Furthermore, in West African culture, excessive physical attractiveness could even be a liability that leads to "people (neglecting) obligations in 'natural' (i.e. kinship) relationships to pursue imagined benefits of 'manufactured' (i.e. voluntary) relationships" (Anderson et al., 2008, p. 355). But what happens when these different views of attractiveness intersect in spaces that contain both voluntaristic-independent and embedded-interdependent qualities? In a 1990 study by Dion, Pak, and Dion on Chinese-Canadians' view on attractiveness, respondents who identified more closely to a collectivist paradigm reported being less influenced by physical attractiveness, compared to those identifying with a Western, independent paradigm. The ever-increasing globalization in the 21st century and its manifestations in media and consumer goods have influenced certain West African settings. Attractive West African people living in parts involved with a global culture may begin to not only believe that their looks will yield positive life outcomes, but also, they may be disappointed they may not reap these benefits in their collectivist culture (Anderson et al., 2008).

The typical dark-skinned Thai male sex worker is located at a similar junction: his cultural background subscribes to an interdependent-collectivist paradigm, while at the same time, his profession is becoming increasingly commercialized, profit-oriented, and geared toward a growing wealthy *farang* clientele. Although the relationship between sex worker and client is primarily one of a sexual nature and economic transaction, the development into a companionate or romantic (if the sex worker self-identifies as gay or bisexual) relationship is not uncommon. Whereas *farangs* find a sexual partner and/or travel companion in this dynamic, the dark-skinned sex worker may receive emotional, in addition to the financial, benefits. He may feel dignified by being viewed as attractive and desirable, as well as competent, knowing that he could remit money to his family. In short, the dark-skinned male sex worker's skin color, when reframed as attractive in the *farang* customer's eyes, can lead to elevated levels of self-esteem and act as a vehicle for upward mobility. This supports the notion that attractiveness can result in positive life outcomes personally, socially, professionally, and romantically. In spite of these possible benefits from having dark skin, however, I think that the possible subversion of colorist standards in Thailand through gay *farang*/dark-skinned sex worker relations diverts attention from a greater, more pernicious structural system: white/European/Western men still undoubtedly have more power over a vulnerable population within this dynamic.

The undermining of colorism within the *farang*/dark-skinned sex worker dynamic does little to change the overall problematic structure: that *farangs* possess much more power over Thais, and their exoticization of dark-skinned men can also be construed as minimizing objectification disguised as "appreciation" for this particular look. Although Thai male sex workers are drawn to the profession as a viable source of capital, they are

subjected to sexual violence, and on account of their place in Thai society's hierarchy as young, poor, and uneducated, they often have to submit to the demands of their clients, who wield more social, financial, and age-based power (van Wijngaarden, 1999). *Farang* clients have the potential to unconsciously or consciously use their racial power as white/European/Western men to exacerbate this imbalanced power dynamic. In an interview, one sex worker reported acquiescing to the painful penetration and biting from a *farang* customer, not only because he feared an unsatisfactory experience would affect the bar's reputation, but also, the worker lacked the language to assert the sexual parameters of the service (Storer, 1999). I assume that because of the assumption that *farangs* are wealthy, bar owners pressure their workers to fully comply with these customers' needs in order to not lose their business. I also assume that sex workers could more deftly sidestep and evade customer demands for certain sexual acts with Thai customers, since both worker and client have the same spoken language and cultural understandings.

Even with the ideal *farang*-sex worker relationship where both parties are satisfied with the sexual, relational, and financial benefits, the *farang* still remains the dominant provider with the Thai man relegated to a dependent, submissive position. For the dark-skinned sex worker, does his self-esteem become dependent on this relationship as well? The *farang*/sex worker relationship acts as a stopgap solution, at best, to the over-arching issue of colorism; media images of and cultural preferences for light skin remain unmitigated and ubiquitous in Thailand, unrelenting in its daily exposure to the dark-skinned Thai man. In an informal interview I had with gay Thai activist Natee Teerarojjanapongs about the issue of colorism in the gay Thai community, he shared a

story about a Thai-*farang* couple he knew. No matter how many compliments the Thai received from his *farang* boyfriend about his attractiveness, he still felt ugly because he had dark skin. It was as if he was resolved in believing this to be an immutable truism. When I asked Mr. Teerarojjanapongs how this paradigm can shift in Thailand, he responded that generational change would be need to overturn the collective unconscious acceptance that "lighter is better."

CHAPTER V

IMPLICATIONS ON SOCIAL WORK/CONCLUSION

While colorism affects male sex workers in Thailand, these issues are also present among U.S. populations, and furthermore, social workers are in a position to explore how colorism affects their clients' internal and interpersonal processes. Admittedly, the proliferation of messages in the 20th century that the U.S. is a colorblind society has minimized the importance of examining skin color's implications. The discussion of race and ethnicity in the U.S. is also often met with disapproval and dismissal, particularly by conservatives and whites, as a politically incorrect topic. The 2008 election of the nation's first African American president, Barack Obama, may also be further reason for North Americans to believe that the U.S. is a true meritocracy, in which individuals of different ethnic backgrounds, socioeconomic statuses, genders, and sexual orientations have equal chances of success. Not unlike Thailand, however, whiteness and light skin color are idealized "in mainstream White and ethnic minority communities in the U.S. (which) has impacted a wide range of societal and individual perceptions ranging from physical attractiveness to intellectual and social competence" (Tummula-Narra, 2007, p. 255). While the issue of skin color has not received much attention in academic journals and literature, there have some studies (Hill, 2000; Hughes and Hertel, 1990; Hunter, 1998; Keith and Herring, 1991; Seltzer and Smith, 1991) which have analyzed colorism in the African American community and its intersection with class, gender, and attractiveness. Their findings revealed that as disparate as these populations seem to be,

dark-skinned African Americans and Thai male sex workers face similar intrapsychic, interpersonal, and cultural struggles.

While gay *farang* tourists would associate dark-skinned sex workers with a tropical paradise, American racial ideology has historically associated dark-skinned African American men with masculine potency and physical prowess (Hill, 2002). Moreover, in a study conducted by Wade (1996), black college students found dark-skinned black men to be more sexually attractive than light-skinned men, and Harvey (1995) showed that fair-skinned black men may not be seen as masculine or virile as dark-skinned black men. On the other hand, stereotypes of dark-skinned African American men, especially those images perpetuated by the media, depict them as dangerous, violent, and untrustworthy. These generalizations have perhaps disadvantaged dark-skinned black men's opportunities and achievement in the workplace, compared to their light-skinned counterparts.

According to an analysis by Hughes and Hertel (1990) of the National Survey of Black Americans, over 200 black interviewers "collected data on both the perceived physical attractiveness and the skin tone of survey respondents" (Hill, 2002, p. 78). This study found that dark-skinned blacks earned 72 cents for every dollar light-skinned blacks earned. One explanation is that the unfavorable images of dark black men make hiring light-skinned blacks more palatable to work settings and also invariably improves the diversity index of the workplace. While hiring dark-skinned African Americans would accomplish the same goal of increasing the number of employees of color, this practice has implied that light-skinned black men are seen as more likely to assimilate into the work environment, not alienate their clients, and not appear threatening

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(Kirschenman and Neckerman, 1998; Thompson and Keith, 2001). Consequently, this unconscious (and at times conscious) colorist discrimination contributes to the reason for disproportionately high numbers of dark-skinned blacks in inner cities where unemployment is highest (Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 1992). While employers strive to increase the multicultural make-up of their agencies, the inclination to hire "safe" light-skinned blacks over darker-skinned blacks only creates cosmetic changes and does little to address the underlying racial prejudice and bias rooted from deeply embedded negative stereotypes of African Americans in society.

While Thai male sex workers experienced colorism, it was on a much smaller degree compared to Thai women; a similar form of gendered colorism has also historically impacted African American women. Despite the efforts of the black power/pride movement of the 1960s and 1970s, the celebration of "Black is beautiful" was short-lived and unable to provide durable changes from the colorist paradigm of "lighter is better." While the dark skin of black men has been, at times, contemporarily seen as a symbol of strength and masculinity, there has not been a reframing of meaning for black women's dark skin.

Hill (2002) wrote that in past generations, throughout Europe, the West and other parts of the world, fair skin tone has been equated with desirable feminine characteristics, like purity and beauty. During the period of slavery in the U.S., the enslaved black woman was anything but feminine, and she was "required to be as masculine as men in the performance of work and (was) as harshly punished as men" (Davis, 1981, p. 5). Following the end of slavery, the image of the dark-skinned black woman as unfeminine persisted through mainstream stereotypes, as exemplified by the heavy-set, caretaking

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Mammy and the bossy matriarch Sapphire. The light-skinned Jezebel image, however, caricatured just the opposite – seductive and hypersexual.

In an effort to be viewed as attractive and feminine, black women have tended to use "beauty products… designed to aid them in looking more phenotypically White" (Hunter, 1998, p. 534). In order to conform to a White standard of beauty, black women can straighten their hair, use contact lenses to lighten their eye color, and alter the sizes of their noses through surgery. Despite using these means to Anglicize their appearance, black women's skin tone remained a static feature, unless they attempted to bleach their skin, which rarely yielded effective results (Thompson and Keith, 2001). Analyzing data from the National Survey of Black Americans, Hill (2002) found that interviewers ranked skin color to be the second strongest predictor of the attractiveness of male and female respondents, second only to their weight. Skin color ranked higher than the factors of income level, educational attainment, and perceived friendliness. Studies on colorism in the African American community revealed a direct correlation between high self-reported levels of attractiveness and light-skin color among black women, and they also showed that not just black men hold black women to colorist standards of feminine beauty, but that women judge each other by these standards as well. Such findings necessitate a need to explore how colorism affects these women on the social-emotional level and influences their self-concept development.

As seen with the Thai male sex workers, that attractiveness can affect life outcomes, self-esteem, and self-efficacy also applies to dark-skinned black women. In both populations, attractiveness is determined mainly by skin color. If light skin is viewed as the standard of beauty in the black community and associated with positive

attributes, a dark-skinned African American woman is then prone to internalizing a negative self-evaluation of herself. Due to her constant exposure to these messages, "(she) may think that she has nothing to offer society no matter how intelligent or inventive she is" (Russell, Wilson, and Hall, 1992, p. 42), since light skin is associated to being "the key to popularity, professional status and a desirable marriage" (Thompson and Keith, 2001, p. 340).

Dark-skinned women's self-esteem is also affected by their sense of belonging within the greater African American community; if the variation of skin tone hues and colorism as are a potential of intraracial dissonance in a community, this could lead to a deeper negative self-evaluation and lack of connectedness with one's racial group. One example of this is the rejection of dark-skinned black women in favor of their lighter-skinned counterparts by African American heterosexual men. A dark-skinned black woman can also feel a weaker sense of mastery and efficacy in her occupational endeavors if she thinks that workplace diversification and mainstreaming favors light-skinned women over her. Since skin color is a stable, discredited characteristic, this woman may construe her skin color to be a lifelong disadvantage that she could associate with being either a cause or major contributor to future work-related failures. Not all dark-skinned African American women felt powerless or without a total lack of agency; one study discovered two equalizing factors that led to a positive self-concept among dark black women. Thompson and Keith (2001) found that self-esteem for black women who are dark were rated just as positively as light-skinned women when the former reported being financially successful or were judged by others to be highly attractive.

Nevertheless, African American women still predominantly experience greater social and emotional penalties for having dark skin, compared to African American men.

Social workers and psychotherapists function in a capacity that allows them to examine with their clients "the relevance of skin color in the intrapsychic and interpersonal processes" (Tummula-Narra, 2007, p. 255). By being critical of the socialization that talking about skin color/tone is politically incorrect in the U.S., social workers provide a validating space for clients to authentically voice their racialized, lived experience. A light-skinned Latino individual, for instance, might disclose that he feels "not Latino enough" among his peers, while also sharing that, in a form of intrafamilial colorism, his parents idealize his fair skin color over his darker, younger sibling. His social worker could help him articulate what "being Latino" means to him and explore what the connection is between his skin color, racial identity development, and social-emotional well-being. How important is skin tone to him as an indicator of group membership? How does the skin tone differential affect his relationship with his sibling, and why do his parents idealize fair skin? Social workers could use the therapeutic space to help our clients unlearn the "oppressive images of his or her skin color held by mainstream culture" (Tummula-Narra, 2007, p. 263). By having the courage to ask questions about what dark skin means, what kinds of messages and attitudes are communicated about dark-skinned people in the media and Internet, and how those messages affect self-concept development, clinicians foster awareness and cultivate a critical thinking mentality in clients.

Of course, social workers and therapists themselves are not immune to the prejudice and bias present in society. It is incumbent on both white clinicians and

clinicians of color to self-interrogate and understand their own racial identity

development, in order to manage countertransference and provide effective treatment to

clients. Tummula-Narra – a clinician of South Asian descent – discussed feeling her

racial identity being made salient by a white client who, prior to their introduction,

mistook her for the agency receptionist. Feeling "othered," the therapist then thought:

> More immediately relevant to the interaction, I was concerned that I somehow disappointed her by not being White, and at the same time, felt angry at her assumptions. These were my fantasies alone, and I wondered about how she was doing, and whether she had recovered from her experience of feeling embarrassed. (Tummula-Narra, 2007, p. 264)

While in treatment, the client discussed her recently deceased grandmother, whom she

described as being of Greek descent and having olive skin which was a shade lighter than

her therapist's. As the therapeutic relationship grew, Tummula-Narra was able to draw

out her client's ambivalent thoughts of admiration of her hard-working, self-sacrificing

grandmother, and her resentment over what she perceived to be a lack of motivation to

work outside the home. Eventually, later in treatment, the clinician inquired:

> "I'm wondering if you are also thinking of our differences." Jennifer stated, "I know that we are different, look different. I don't always like the way it feels though." (Tummula-Narra, 2007, p. 265)

This same open dialogue approach can be adopted to engage clients with another

related form of oppression that is prevalent in the U.S. and operates under the framework

that "white is right": internalized racism. Some gay Asian American men could benefit

from exploring why their masculinity and desirability are subordinated within a racialized

masculinity hierarchy (Phua, 2007). For a number of Asian men, this leads them to

viewing white men as their partner preference and devaluing other Asian men as

unattractive and feminine. Why is it that white men are placed above men of color in the

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hierarchy of gay standards of beauty? It is not coincidental that different racial groups in the U.S. face parallel struggles that prompt them to question their self-worth, attractiveness, and sense of mastery on account of their skin tone or race/ethnicity. Clinicians of color can play an instrumental role by providing twinship to clients and modeling ways to negotiate the multiple meanings of implications of colorism. In another vignette, Tummula-Narra (2007) discussed her work with a client of the same ethnicity who strived to hold the dual perspectives of his dark skin as devalued in India, yet exoticized by Western standards. This client intentionally requested a South Asian therapist perhaps because he felt a clinician of the same ethnicity could offer him more twinship and understanding than an Anglo clinician.

By pushing through the discomfort that comes with discussions about race/ethnicity in the U.S., social workers can use the therapeutic venue as a space for not just individual change, but social change as well. Whether they are Thai male sex workers or dark-skinned African American women, clients can challenge and unlearn colorist notions that have existed for generations and infiltrated and intersected other social issues surrounding their identity – such as class, gender, and sexual orientation.

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