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## **A Process of Becoming: U.S. Born African American and Black Women in the Process of Liberation From Internalized Racism**

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A PROCESS OF BECOMING: U.S. BORN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND BLACK  
WOMEN IN A PROCESS OF LIBERATION FROM INTERNALIZED RACISM

A Dissertation Presented

by

TANYA OVEA WILLIAMS

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

May 2011

Social Justice Education Program

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## DEDICATION

For those who came before me, my grandparents,

King Curtis Bass  
Tiny Bass  
Henry "Pete" Harris  
Effie Lee Harris

I pray that I have done you proud.

And to those who will come after me, my niece and nephew,

Emanuel Alexander and Ariana Elise Wooten

I hope I have lit the path well.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Though I have done the dissertation “by myself”, I have thankfully never been alone in this process. Ancestors, family, friends, and mentors have held my hand as I have made my way through the forest-like areas, and gently pushed me up the many mountains that I faced on this long journey. My thanks are many, they are heartfelt, and will never be adequate. I feel in awe of Creator God, the Divine, the Universe - that I would be gifted with such an opportunity as this one. My gratitude overflows.

I want to acknowledge my ancestors, who fought to survive in a system of supremacy and racism the best way they knew how...by never giving up and doing their best to survive. I reflected on and listened to your voices, your energy, and your modeling during this process. Thank you for your wisdom and model of perseverance.

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And lastly, to the participants in this study, thank you for your honesty, your sisterhood, and your strength. For a long time I thought I was alone in this struggle, you told me otherwise. I thank you for providing a mirror to look into and stories to be inspired by. I pray that I have represented you well and continue to clear a path for our healing to enter.

## ABSTRACT

A PROCESS OF BECOMING: U.S. BORN AFRICAN AMERICAN AND BLACK  
WOMEN IN A PROCESS OF LIBERATION FROM INTERNALIZED RACISM

MAY 2011

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Internalized racism is a contributing factor to the inability of African Americans to overcome racism. (Speight, 2007) Because this is a cognitive phenomenon over which individuals can have agency, it is important to study, understand, and seek out ways that African Americans are able to gain a liberatory perspective in the midst of a racist society. By using colonization psychology and post-traumatic slave psychology to define the phenomenon, and Jackson's Black identity development model theory to ground and analyze participants' process of liberation, this study used phenomenological in-depth interviewing to understand the experiences of African American and Black women who have gained more consciousness of their internalized racism. The researcher interviewed 11 U.S. Born African American and Black women for an hour and a half to gain their understanding of internalized racism and liberation. The study found that Black and African American women in a process of liberation 1) move from experiencing lack of control to an experience of having agency; 2) gain agency from developing greater knowledge and pride of a positive black identity; 3) replace negative socialization with a



knowledge of self; and 4) are supported in their liberation by a systemic analysis of racism. The study also found that 1) internalized racism and liberation are complexly defined phenomena, 2) participants continued to practice manifestations of internalized racism while practicing a liberatory consciousness, which confirms the theories of the cyclical nature of identity, and 3) racial identity development models offer a framework for understanding a transition from internalized racism towards liberation but lack clarity about how transformation actually occurs.

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

The idea of a black nation seems so far-fetched as to be ludicrous but if you entertain it for a minute, even as an impossible dream, it should give you a feeling of wholeness and belonging you've never had and can never have as long as [B]lacks have to live in a country where they are despised. (Lester, 1993, p. 32)

The quote above begins the Afrolantica Awakening chapter of Derrick Bell's (1993) *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*, a book of metaphorical stories that highlight the current state of African Americans in the United States at the hands of White racism. In this chapter, Bell tells the story of a land that has arisen from the sea that is inhabitable only by African Americans. When explored, the land offered Blacks "an invigorating experience of heightened self esteem, of liberation, of waking up"(p. 32) and a portion of the African American population decides to emigrate to escape the struggles facing them daily to regain the self-esteem denied to them by internalized racism. Unfortunately, the fabled land described in Bell's story does really not exist, and African Americans and Blacks in the United States are faced with not only the outcomes of White supremacy and domination but also the negative psychological outcomes of subordinate racial identity, internalized racism.

Internalized racism has encouraged the physical, spiritual, and emotional self-mutilation and self-degradation of a community of people (Akbar, 1996; Bivens, 2005; hooks, 1995; Speight, 2007). By influencing the psychological experience it has enticed African Americans to contribute to their own demise within a larger system of oppression (Akbar, 1995; Fanon, 1967; Friere, 1970; hooks, 1995, 2003; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Leary, 2005). Relative to other topics, such as economic disparity or joblessness, which, too, are generally thought to be directly connected to the many manifestations of



institutionalized racism (Feagin, 2006), the effect of internalized racism is rarely researched (hooks, 1995) and its discussion in communities of color and academic communities is a whisper. Definitions of exactly what it is, how it is manifested or acted out, what its consequences are, and how to liberate oneself from its grip seem to vary from person to person and situation to situation, therefore, making it a difficult concept to pin down. Noticing complexities of one's own daily experiences with internalized racism and further confusion about how to confront the phenomenon internally and externally causes it to continually be overlooked by individuals doing empirical research (Akbar, 1996; Bivens, 2005; hooks, 2003; Love, 1998).

Over the years, some theorists have sought to bring awareness to internalized racism by proposing solutions and theoretical stage constructs to describe how individuals can root out internalized racism in their personal, professional, and emotional lives. These ways of theorizing about internalized racism and its impact provided hope only in limited ways. Theorists provide suggested movement away from the psychological and behavioral barriers created by internalized racism but by only theoretically speaking about what actions or beliefs might benefit the individual or what they have peripherally noticed in communities. However, empirical research to support theoretical assertions is largely absent; Frantz Fanon (1965) gets the closest with a look at the effect of colonization on his psychiatric clients in his book *Black Skin, White Masks* to capturing the affects of internalized racism.

For this dissertation study, I am interested in exploring internalized racism's affects African American females self perception; her perception of her interactions with her community; how internalized racism is behaviorally and psychologically manifested;

how individuals have challenged the internalized racism and moved toward liberation with a liberated consciousness in the midst of a racist system. My excitement and interest lie with my belief that a closer look at internalized racism amongst those who have noticed, named, and begun to confront internalized racism will inform understanding of successful methods to challenge internalized racism, therefore, oppression itself (Fletcher, 1999). A qualitative, in-depth phenomenological interview study of African American and Black women who confront attitudes and behavioral patterns that stem from internalized racism will provide an exploration into the phenomenon of internalized racism and empirically examine real-time attempts at liberation practices. My voice as a researcher, combined with the voices of other African American and Black women will allow for a study of the manifestations and impact of internalized racism on individual lives and an exploration into the theoretical perspectives about liberation presented by liberation psychology and identity development theorists.

### Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of African American and Black women in their journeys of liberation from attitudes and behaviors associated with internalized racism. The study will specifically look at the ways that:

1. African American and Black women define and contextualize the phenomenon of internalized racism and liberation in their lives
2. Internalized racism and liberation manifest in the lives of African American and Black women

3. Internalized racism and liberation have impacted the lives of African American and Black women
4. This knowledge can provide social justice educators insight about ways to teach about race and racism

Additionally, a hope is to provide insight about the confrontation of internalized racism and experience a liberatory consciousness in the midst of an institutionalized system of racism by studying the experiences of women who are consciously challenging their internalized racism. Ways to be relieved from the negative effects of internalized racism have been studied very lightly, mostly as ways of reactively coping (Shorter-Gooden, 2004) with racism, as opposed to taking a proactive stance by studying about liberation. Researching ways of coping with racism appears to condemn individuals who struggle with internalized racism to a life of struggle. I believe by looking at the ways that individuals have developed a liberatory consciousness, particularly around their struggle with internalized racism, can provide insight to how we teach about internalized racism and guide people who are wrestling with this outgrowth of racism to live liberated experiences in the midst of a racist society. By studying 11 women – African American and Black identified, all born and raised in the U.S. and interviewing them with phenomenological interviews methods, it is clear that internalized racism manifests in a myriad of ways and therefore, there is no one clear way to liberatory consciousness.

As will be seen in the literature review, there are varying definitions of internalized racism. The study builds specifically on the definitions and examples of internalized racism provided by the psychology of slavery and colonization psychology literature to ground the data. Racial identity development models, specifically Jackson's

(1976; 2001) Black Identity Development model, are used as a frame to guide the interpretation of the transition from less consciousness about internalized racism to a liberatory consciousness. Most of the racial identity development models (Cokley & Chapman, 2009; Helms, 1991) feature a stage where individuals' internalize the society's perspectives about their particular racial group as well as feature the potential of movement beyond that internalized perspective. By interviewing participants specifically about their experience with internalized racism and liberation, this study will provide a magnified view of those particular stages and focus specifically on the transition between the stages of internalization of society's racist perspectives and the resistance that individuals in subordinate racial social identity groups work to develop.

### Significance

This research is important because, as previously stated, internalized racism is rarely discussed publically and researched empirically even less. By researching the ways in which individuals confront internalized racism, this study provides African Americans with the opportunity to be flexible within a system of oppression, highlighting the opportunities for people of color to have individual agency in a system that has sought to limit their access to rights and resources. Studying the experiences of the participants in this study and giving voice to their experiences through interviews goes beyond the traditional "blame the victim" rhetoric that has surfaced in recent years (Cosby & Poussaint, 2007) and puts the experience of African Americans and Blacks in a systemic context while highlighting the ways that individuals can have ownership in their liberation from the system. Cosby and Poussaint's (2007) most recent publication, *Come*

*on People*, offers insight for challenging the outcomes of internalized racism, but chooses to do it in an accusatory ways only lightly mentioning institutionalized racism.

Additionally the authors fail to allow for the voices of those in the midst of the struggle of internalized racism, only providing the voices of those who have successfully overcome their individual struggle. As stated earlier, the study seeks to explore the process of moving to a liberatory consciousness and explore the transition in the struggle in order to show that there is a path, rather than blaming and shaming those not already on the path to challenging internalized racism.

### Research Questions

The dissertation study is guided by one main research question and supported by a several of sub-questions that helped shape the methodology and analysis of the data that was collected. The overarching research question of this study is: *What is (are) the experiences of African American women engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism?* Additional questions supporting the inquiry are: a) *if individuals have recognized the negative psychological and behavioral impact of racism in their lives, how do they define/experience that impact?* b) *how have they confronted the negative psychological and behavioral impact of racism in their lives?and c) How have they moved forward in a process of liberation?*

Though language continues to evolve, I use African American throughout the study to represent people living in the United States who are descendants or survivors of the transcontinental trade of enslaved African people and chattel slavery within the United States. I am a descendant of individuals who survived chattel slavery; therefore, it

is my interest to understand how internalized racism has affected this group of people. As the data was collected, I noted that though most of the participants identified themselves as African American with ancestry who survived chattel slavery, at least one of my participants identified herself as Black, as her parents were not U.S.-born citizens but rather born in the Caribbean and immigrated to the US. Though born in the US, she did not identify as African American; therefore, I am choosing to broaden the terminology used in my original question to African American *and* Black in order to include all the identities of the participants represented in the study.

### Scope

The focus of this dissertation is the intrapersonal and interpersonal experience of African Americans as a result of internalized racism and movement toward liberation. Intrapersonal refers to the relationship that African Americans have with themselves—their inner thoughts of what it means for them to be African American in the United States. By interpersonal, I refer to the relationships that African Americans have with others—other African Americans, other people of color, multiracial, or White people.

It is important also to note the choice of language and terminology that is used within the dissertation study. I am specifically focusing on the experience of African Americans and Blacks who were born in the United States and have lived all of their lives here. I do not mean to say that other Black people living in the United States, such as Black immigrants from Africa, the Caribbean, South America, or other locations around the world are not affected by internalized racism. The exploration of how the phenomenon affects the latter group is outside the scope of this study. As noted in the

research question, the terminology “process of liberation” is the statement that describes the experience of challenging the accuracy of internalized thoughts and beliefs that people of color and Whites are socialized to believe as a result living in a racist society.

As will be seen in the literature review, much like internalized racism, there is not one agreed upon definition of liberation, as some theorist define it as a static location that individuals and society are trying to reach, and others define it as the steps that individuals and the society make in movement away from racism and other forms of oppression. In this study, I found myself wrestling with my own beliefs about reaching a static place of liberation and acknowledging that any steps taken toward acknowledging internalized racism could be seen as liberation. For the purposes of this study, I will use process of liberation to mean any movement taken to gain consciousness of and take steps away from the socialization of internalized racism. Though the review of literature will attempt to give a broad overview of some of the literature that exists about liberation, it is outside of the scope of this paper to determine a larger definition of liberation for the field of social justice.

Lastly, internalized racism is a particular version of a larger phenomenon called internalized oppression. In order to understand the definition of internalized racism in a broader perspective, I read authors who talked about internalized racism as well as those who spoke about internalized oppression, the colonized mind, and post-traumatic slave syndrome. Though the term internalized racism was not always specifically used, I understand these other terms or syndromes, the colonized mind and post traumatic slave syndrome, to be more specific ways to talk about the same phenomenon—the

phenomenon of African Americans or other oppressed or subordinate peoples psychologically taking in oppressive messages and manifesting them in a variety of ways.

### My Interest

I am an African American woman who in the last nine years has begun to explore and uncover the impact that internalized racism has had on my life. My education in predominately White institutions started early when my mother enrolled me in the early childhood pre-school program at University of Houston. Class photos reveal that I was often the only child of color in my class. My entry into the world of White racism and Whiteness began early as I boarded the bus in the darkness of the early morning in my predominately black neighborhood and was driven into wealthy White neighborhoods to receive a “better,” resource-rich, education from predominately White schools. Continuing through elementary, junior high, high school, college, and even graduate school, the percentage of African Americans in my class populations never rose above 10% and mostly hovered between 3%-4%. Though my schooling was of high academic quality, I was stunted socially and emotionally by the racism I faced from White teachers, students, and society as a whole. Though much of the racism that I faced was covert or passive racism, it left me with the psychological scars of self -doubt about my appearance, intelligence, and my own Black identity.

It has been difficult writing about a phenomenon that I continue to challenge within myself. Listening to a recent radio program, the speaker, Rabbi Lawrence Kushner, though speaking about the concept of faith, echoed my thoughts about writing about internalized racism when he said, “One of the reasons that speaking of faith is such



a slippery and a moving target is because we're trying to talk about the stuff of which we are. We're trying to take consciousness and turn it back on itself" (Tippett, 2004). As an African American who has internalized racism for many years, I often feel like my academic exploration into internalized racism through my graduate program has been like trying to turn my life experience on its head and deepening my consciousness about the impact of racism on my life. It has proven difficult to reflect and re-live how internalized racism has impacted my thoughts, actions, relationships, priorities, and choices. In my more recent examination of my own internalized racism, I can look back on the many racially based self-oppressive thoughts and actions that I can now name as manifestations of internalized racism that contributed to me colluding with the larger system of racism. I didn't have an understanding or the language to express what was going on for me nor did I have the recognition that liberation was even possible or that it might lessen my negative experience with my own racial identity. I want others' experience with racism and internalized racism to be different from mine.

Clearly, my interest in this topic begins with my own experiences. But it continues much further, past a self-centered exploration of my own African American identity and experience as a person of color in the United States. My interest in the topic of internalized racism is intrinsically rooted in the improvement of life experiences of all who are affected by racial oppression, which are both the privileged and those subordinated by oppression. Subscribing to the beliefs of Dr. Martin Luther King,

In a real sense all life is inter-related. All persons are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly affects all indirectly. I can never be what I ought to be until you are what you ought to be, and you can never be what you ought to be until I am what I ought to be. This is the inter-related structure of reality (King, 1963, pp. 18-19)

I believe that the healing of the ills of internalized racism will be beneficial for us all.

It has proven difficult to reflect and re-live how internalized racism has impacted my thoughts, my actions, my relationships, and choices, but during the dissertation study I had the pleasure of being in conversation with and hearing the stories of others who have been on a journey of their own away from the socialization of internalized racism. Through this process of study, I watched my own thoughts about internalized racism and liberation transform as expressed in this entry from my research journal,

It feels like an idiotic plan sometimes to have chosen to study something that I'm so close to – to be in and struggle with so intimately. It's like that quote from *Speaking of Faith* – to study that which we are—to go inside—itself feels hard, frustrating, impossible and loving all at the same time. I've been intimate w/ internalized racism for a long time—and on this more recent path our intimacy feels more healthy—less like the codependent relationship that internalized racism and I have had in the past—more like friends who have a strained, uneasy relationship - both knowing that we'll be in one another's' life for a long, long time—possibly forever—at least until the parent of internalized racism—racism—lasts. But just like a past relationship with an ex-girlfriend—the more you get perspective on the relationship—the less power it seems to have. The exploration of liberation is my perspective. Its clarity has helped me understand that I don't need internalized racism like I thought I did. Where I used to think that I needed the protection of internalized racism to keep me safe, liberation has taught me about the strength that lies within and helped me shed some of internalized racism's shackles. (Research Journal – 10/13/10)

Internalized racism has the potential to be a strong enemy in the psyche of African Americans and Blacks born in the US. Even as an African American studying the phenomenon, it catches me off guard every time it surfaces in my psyche and through my actions. I think I know all of its tricks, and then it seems to surprise me with a new way to manifest itself. But I guess that's what it means to be in a process of liberation—at least that's what my participants explained in their interviews—that you're never done. As one of them explained, “Just as White people will never completely unlearn racism, people of color will never completely unlearn internalized racism” (Earlene). Everyone's brain,

psyche, way of being, consciousness—has been shifted as a result of racism. I realize that my own experience in this process of liberation shifted as I went along.

### Organization of the Dissertation

The remaining chapters will be organized as follows. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature of internalized racism, liberation and Black and African American racial identity development models, and liberation. Chapter 3 provides the methodology used for data collection and data analysis. Chapter 4 is the first of two chapters that present the findings of the study. Chapter 4 provides the participant profiles for each of the participants, while Chapter 5 provides a thematic analysis of the participant interviews as a whole with specific attention paid to what participants have to say about the phenomenon of internalized racism and liberation and the manifestations and impact each have on each of their lives. Lastly, in Chapter 6, I report conclusions and implications for teaching drawn from the study.

## CHAPTER 2

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter provides an overview of the literatures that elucidate the phenomenon presented in this study. The purpose of this qualitative study is to explore the experiences of African American and Black women in their process of liberation from internalized racism. In the review of the literature, I explore the phenomenon of internalized racism and the concept of liberation by reviewing bodies of literature that have been written by theorists and critical thinkers in the fields of psychiatry, education, cultural studies, sociology, and psychology. Since we know that racism and oppression in the U.S. is pervasive (Utsey et al., 2001) and the internalization of a racist system is one of the roots of internalized racism (Speight, 2007; Utsey et al., 2001), in order to contextualize internalized racism in the following review of literature, in the first section, I will situate the phenomenon in a larger theory of oppression and show the linkages between the two. The first section will be followed by a discussion of and will review the ways that theorists generally define internalized racism, drawing specific attention to the psychological and behavioral ways that internalized racism has been defined by these authors. Additionally in this section, a discussion of the roots and manifestations of internalized racism will be discussed through the perspectives of two theoretical frameworks, colonization psychology and post traumatic slave syndrome, both commonly used to understand this phenomenon of internalized racism. Though the term internalized racism is not the vocabulary employed by the theorists included in this section, the descriptions and details discussed correspond to the phenomenon and provide a nuanced understanding of internalized racism.

The second section follows a similar outline of the first, only it will pay attention to the phenomenon of liberation. It will discuss the ways in which theorists writing about liberation define, discuss and analyze the phenomenon of liberation paying attention to the ways in which it has been developed in the fields of psychology and social justice education. Additionally, it will explore the ways that colonization psychology and the psychology of slavery discuss liberation in their theories. The last section will give an overview of racial identity development literature focusing on Jackson's Black Identity Development model (1976; 2001) to frame the current examination of the transition to liberation from internalized racism as defined and analyzed in this study.

#### Internalized Racism Connection to Oppression Theory

As a social justice educator, specific conceptual frameworks based in oppression theory have guided my selection and discussion of the literature. The first conceptual framework is the social construction framework that states that social identity categories have been created over time by society and continue to change (Omi & Winant, 1986). Secondly, an oppression theory framework; that states that these socially constructed identities are advantaged or disadvantaged by constructed systems of privilege and power, which privileges Whites over African Americans (Adams, Bell & Griffin, 1997; Feagin, 2006; Hardiman & Jackson, 1997; Utsey et al, 2001). Understanding these two conceptual frameworks provide the necessary foundation to understanding how internalized racism helps keep a system of institutionalized racism in place.

Fletcher's (1999) article, "Internalized Oppression: The Enemy Within" uses Love's model of oppression which describes oppression as a tabletop which is supported

and perpetuated by two strong interrelated forces: institutionalized oppression and internalized oppression (Fletcher, 1999). It is clearly states that because of their interrelation, all attempts to eliminate a larger system of oppression must include an exploration of internalized racism or the elimination will be futile (Fletcher, 1999). This interrelation with institutionalized oppression helps clarify why these two conceptual frameworks ground this exploration into internalized racism. I agree that the larger system of oppression cannot be defeated without exploration of the phenomenon of internalized racism.

Hardiman and Jackson (1997) also discuss the interrelatedness of two social justice concepts that help keep oppression in place and introduce the terminology, “internalized subordination”, to represent internalized racism. They state, “Internalized subordination refers to ways in which targets collude with their own oppression. People who have been socialized in an oppressive environment, and who accept a definition of themselves that is hurtful and limiting.” (Hardiman & Jackson, 1997) Understanding the concept of collusion can help explain why constructed roles based on power and privilege can create a relationship between Whites and People of Color that helps keep oppression in place.

#### A General Definition of Internalized Racism

There is a dearth of research, and therefore a lack of understanding of the concept of internalized racism (hooks, 2003; Speight, 2007). Much research has explored systems of oppression and more specifically racism, but there has been very little empirical research done about psychological effects of a system of racism on the subordinated

group. (Speight, 2007) The racist society in which we live produces opportunities, systems of government and education, propaganda, media images and many other behaviors that uplift White people and negate the experiences and perspectives of groups of color. (Feagin, 2006) According to Speight (2007) in her article “Internalized Racism: One More Piece of the Puzzle” internalized racism is “all about the cultural imperialism, the domination, the structure, the normalcy of the “way things are” in our racialized society (p.128). As a result of living in a society that speaks negatively of them, many African Americans and Blacks internalize, or make racist messages part of their attitudinal and behavioral nature by unconsciously assimilating these messages into their psyche (Hill, 1995; Flynn, 2000; Norrington-Sands, 2002; Speight 2007). African Americans and Blacks can begin to believe that they are not as valued as Whites in society and in fact, possess less than desirable attributes (Bryant, 2000; hooks, 1995; Bivens, 2005; Akbar, 1996). Some theorists say that internalized racism is the “believing, adopting, accepting and incorporating” the negative beliefs provided by the oppressor as truth (Parmer, 2004; Pheterson, 1986; Rosenwasser, 2002). Furthermore, in addition to believing the messages and images, those negative beliefs get acted out or manifested towards the self, toward others who share the individual’s racial identity, and towards those from other groups of color in very hurtful ways (Duran & Duran, 1995). Hill (1995) defines it as “the act of turning upon ourselves, upon our families and upon our own people.” (p. 72) As a result of internalization, African Americans often learn to loathe themselves rather than understand that these negative beliefs are products of a racist society designed to emotionally, economically, and spiritually oppress groups of people (Rosenwasser, 2002, Speight 2007).

### Process of Internalization

Above, internalized racism has been generally defined, but through what sources do people of color learn these messages, which they internalize? Some of sources of individuals' internalized racism can be traced to integrated schools (hooks, 2003), media images and writing, or what Bryant (2000) calls "injurious propaganda." (p.14) Fletcher (1999) says that the immersion of people of color into these negative images of themselves and the accepting, either consciously or unconsciously, of these images as "truth" contributes to building of subservience in the minds of oppressed people. (p. 100) Wherever people of color are confronted with images, language, attitudes, behaviors, misinformation, and stereotypes that present them as negative or less than Whites is where the roots of internalized racism exist, including their own families.

Families of color are also breeding grounds for the roots of internalized racism as the negative messages have been passed down generation to generation (Parmer, 2004, Duran & Duran, 1995). One way to understand the generational traumatic transmission of ideas, beliefs, actions, and experiences of enslaved generations African American descendants who are not enslaved is to do a cursory exploration of the theories of cultural trauma and collective memory. Alexander (2004), editor of a collection of essays on cultural trauma, says, "Cultural trauma occurs when members of a collectivity feel they have been subjected to a horrendous event that leaves indelible marks upon their group consciousness, marking their memories forever and changing their future identity in fundamental and irrevocable ways" (p. 1). Undoubtedly, chattel slavery represents the "horrendous event" and it has arguably rooted itself in the memories of descendants of enslaved people in the United States through stories, family tales, textbook



representations, and television images. Neil Smelser (2001) cited in Ron Eyerman's book, *Cultural Trauma and the Collective Memory*, furthers the concept and defines it in this way:

A memory accepted and publicly given credence by a relevant membership group and evoking an event or situation which is (a) laden with negative affect, (b) represented as indelible, and (c) regarded as threatening a society's existence or violating one or more of its fundamental cultural presuppositions (p. 3).

Chattel slavery caused a cultural dissonance as its systemic violence, aggression and dehumanization challenged U.S. cultural statements of all people being created equal. It has left mental marks on both African American descendants of enslaved people and white descendants of their captors and owners.

### Patterns and Manifestations of Internalized Racism

When something is manifested it is "displayed" or "demonstrated" (Merriam-Webster, 1997) or an action is produced. Lipsky (1998) explains that "manifestations [of internalized racism] end up showing up in two places where it "seem(s) safe" in a society dominated by White people (p. 10). As stated in the literature, it is "safer" for subordinated groups in systems of oppression to act out their anger, frustration, and feelings of powerlessness interpersonally on members of their subordinated group. This can affect those within one's racial identity group, such as those in their immediate family, those in their larger supportive community, and even strangers in their same racial identity group. This can take the form of invalidation of the individuals' family, particularly children with fierce criticism and faultfinding (Lipsky, 1998). Additionally, other individuals might lash out in physical, verbal or emotional assaults on their family

and others in the community because of repressed rage, feelings of inferiority, and self-hatred (Gainor, 1992; Parmer, 2004; Poupart, 2003). For example, it is often perceived that occurrences of Black on Black crime are nothing more than a manifestation of internalized racism (Poupart, 2003). Other ways that in-group directed manifestations of internalized racism might show up are attacks toward any member of the group who might step forward to take on leadership responsibilities (Lipsky, 1998), patterns of fear, and general mistrust, withdrawal and isolation from the individual's racial group (Hill, 1995). Additionally, may manifest intrapersonally because challenging the oppressor or the privileged in the system might produce retaliation from the oppressor making the situation more difficult (Duran & Duran, 1995; Akbar, 1996; Leary, 2005; Lipsky, 1987), which can stimulate self-loathing in the individual.(Gainor, 1992).

The manifestations of internalized racism toward the self can be just as, if not more damaging than those directed at others. Authors cite excessive drinking (Hill, 1995) and self-sabotaging, such as poor eating habits, (hooks, 2003) that appear in communities of color as overt examples of the effects of internalized racism on the individual. The covert examples can be the most damaging, though. bell hooks (2003) states that often “blacks in (settings where they are the lone Black person in a group of Whites) collude in their own shaming and humiliation because they have been socialized by internalized racism to feel ‘chosen,’ and therefore better than other Black people” (p. 166).

In order to understand the nuances of internalized racism more intricately, the theoretical frameworks of the psychology of slavery and colonization psychology offer

theories about the roots and examples of the ways that internalized racism may be manifested in the lives of Blacks and African Americans.

### Psychology of Slavery

In his seminal work, *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*, psychologist Na'im Akbar (1997) says that the attitudes and behaviors learned during slavery are the last obstacles for the mental liberation of African Americans (p. ii). Akbar clearly describes the psychological impact racism, and specifically chattel slavery, has had on generations of African Americans. Akbar and others argue that beliefs and patterns self and group devaluing that are practiced today by African Americans can be traced back to the traumatizing experiences and situations faced by slaves for the 300 years of chattel slavery in the United States (Leary, 2005, Latif & Latif, 1994; Reid et. al., 2004; Akbar, 1997; Russell, 1992). This section will review theories that connect the psychological affect of chattel slavery to current patterns of internalized racism in African American communities.

### Cultural Trauma and Collective Memory

While it still is understood as an uncomfortable unmentionable in the history of the U.S. and much of the world, chattel slavery continues to rattle around as a memory that is laden with “negative affect” (Eyerman, 2001). By closely exploring these definitions, it is easier to see chattel slavery as a cultural trauma and contribution to the collective memory of African Americans, which might contribute to internalized racist attitudes and behaviors.

Because of this collective memory, Eyerman (2001) states that the experience of slavery by past generations contributes to the overall “identity-formation” of African American people in the United States (p. 1). Theorists, Duran and Duran (1995) concur with the idea of generational effect of trauma on cultural groups and family systems.

They write:

If these traumas are not resolved in the lifetime of the person suffering such upheaval, it is unthinkable that they person will not fall into some type of dysfunctional behavior that will then become the learning environment for their children. Once these children grow up with fear, rage, danger, and grief as the norm it is little wonder that family problems of all types begin to emerge within the family system.” (Duran & Duran 31)

Though they write referring to Native Americans, a compelling comparison can be drawn to the experience of African Americans and their experience in chattel slavery. Love (2000) posits that decades of abuse and internalizing of pathological patterns, these patterns are seen as part of the cultural tradition (Love, 2000). As stated by Leary, et al. (2005), there were no free therapy sessions for enslaved people after slavery; the normalized damaging behaviors of surviving in the hostile environment of chattel slavery were passed down through generations (p. 152). Theorists Akbar and Leary, developer of the Post Traumatic Slavery Syndrome theory, connect the psychological impact of slavery and name ways in which patterns learned during slavery are collective memory and currently experienced as internalized racism. Though not specifically named as internalized racism, the examples that will be given fit descriptions of internalized racism as given in definitions provided earlier in the paper.

## Psychology of Slavery Defined

Many theorists have written about the affects of slavery on African American culture (Latif, 1994, Reid, 2004, Russell, 1992), but for this paper I chose to focus specifically on the work of Dr. Na'im Akbar, who has lectured on and written numerous books about psychological slavery in African American communities and Dr. Joy Leary, an social work researcher and professor.

The theory of Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome, (PTSS) states that African Americans who survived chattel slavery sustained traumatic psychological and emotional injury and through current continued inequality, racism, and oppression continue to be injured, and subsequently manifest characteristics of the syndrome (Leary, 2005). Leary writes about her PTSS theory as adaptations that have been adopted by African Americans to deal with past traumas and on-going oppression. (p. 5) Leary, driven by a belief that historical exploration is needed to understand current productions of “negative perceptions, images, and behaviors” (p. 13), states,

We rarely look to our history to understand how African Americans adapted their behavior over centuries in order to survive the stifling effects of chattel slavery, effects that are evident today. [I believe that] the behaviors in the scenarios (listed in the prologue of her book), as well as many others are in large part related to trans-generational adaptations associated with the past traumas of slavery and on-going oppression (p. 13-14).

Leary believes that these adaptations in attitudes and behaviors allowed slaves to survive, and that they continue to manifest in today's African American culture, though no longer needed. (Leary, 2005) Instead, she suggests that African Americans closely examine current attitudes and behaviors through the lens of history and begin to

relinquish these survival adaptations adopted by slaves and generationally passed down for a healthier perspective and cultural self-esteem (Leary, 2005, p. 16).

Discussing the psychological impact of chattel slavery in the introduction to the book, *Breaking the Chains of Psychological Slavery*, Akbar (1997) names it as the “ghost of the plantation” that continues to impact generations of African Americans. (p. iv) Linking with Leary’s theory, he says, “...the blemish of these inhumane conditions persists as a kind of post-traumatic stress syndrome on the collective mind of Africans in America and though its original cause can not be altered, the genesis can be understood,” (p. i) The theorists agree that psychological effects of chattel slavery preoccupies current generations unnecessarily with old hurts and tending old wounds, providing no constructive solution for the present and threatening for the atrocities of the past to be repeated.

Akbar (1997) makes a clear connection to the definition and current manifestations of internalized racism when he says,

As cruel and painful as chattel slavery was, it could be exceeded only by a worse form of slavery. The slavery that captures the mind and imprisons the motivation, perception, aspiration and identity in a web of anti-self images, generating a personal and collective self-destruction, is more cruel than the shackles on the wrists and ankles. The slavery that feeds on the mind, invading the soul of man, destroying his loyalties to himself and establishing allegiance to forces which destroy him, is an even worse form of capture. The influences that permit an illusion of freedom, liberation, and self-determination, while tenaciously holding one’s mind in subjugation, is the folly of only the sadistic. (p. vi)

### Psychology of Slavery and Internalized Racism

When describing her theory, Leary asks the simple questions, “What effect has our history had on our [African Americans] culture and our soul?” (Leary, 2005, p.115)

and “What are the impacts of generations of slavery and oppression on a people?” (p. 115) Both she and Akbar answer those questions by highlighting specific ways that current manifestations of internalized racism connect to survival patterns learned by enslaved people during chattel slavery. Using a mix of terminology used by both Akbar and Leary, I have grouped these manifestations into two categories affecting the African American community and individuals within the community: 1) limited identity, or the limited ways that African Americans see themselves as a result of internalizing attitudes born during chattel slavery and interpersonal/community effects, or 2) ways that relationships and communities have been affected by a limiting constructed identity and capabilities. The following sections will review the current patterns mentioned by Leary and Akbar and make connections to their roots in chattel slavery as theorized by the two authors.

### Limited Identity

The types of patterns that fall under the limited identity category are intrapersonal in nature. These are patterns or manifestations that are named by Akbar and Leary as more damaging to the individual, which, in turn, affects the community. One of Leary’s major categories that she names is one of “vacant esteem”, which she describes as the state of “believing oneself to have little or no worth, exacerbated by the group and societal pronouncement of inferiority” (Leary, 2005, p. 129), which then has influence over how the individual is viewed by the family, community, and larger society. Akbar, who names this as one of the most destructive results of slavery (Akbar, 1997, p. 14) discusses the roots of this personal inferiority to slavery by noting how the slave

overseers systematically created this state of being in order for slavery to work more effectively:

The shrewd slave makers were fully aware that people who still respected themselves as human beings would resist to the death the dehumanizing process of slavery. Therefore, a systematic process of creating a sense of inferiority in the proud African was necessary in order to maintain them as slaves. This was done by humiliating and dehumanizing acts such as public beatings, parading them on slave blocks unclothed, and inspecting them as though they were cattle or horses (Akbar, 1997, p. 14).

Akbar and Leary both link this lack of esteem and belief in inferiority to a multitude of current manifestations of internalized racism. Both of them name such examples of black on black homicide (Leary, 2005, p. 133; Akbar, 1997, p. 15), undermining the achievements of other African Americans (Leary, p. 132; Akbar, p. 15), and resentment of African physical features (Akbar, p.15) as results of this “vacant esteem.”

Another pattern rooted in slavery connected to vacant esteem and personal inferiority is in-group color discrimination (Akbar, 1997). Two main beliefs created the seed for the root of this manifestation of internalized racism. First, the African’s dark skin became equated with the reason that Africans were enslaved (Akbar, p. 23). Additionally, during chattel slavery, skin color was a code for social position on the plantation (Akbar, 1997; Russell, 1992; Latif, 1994). Those slaves, because they were often the off-spring of the master and a raped slave, whose features more closely resembled the slave master, were assigned positive traits and given higher, more powerful social roles in the plantation hierarchy (Akbar, 1997; Latif, 1994). Unfortunately, that belief has been transferred and become a cultural belief as many African Americans continue to believe that beauty, competence, and worth are greater among lighter skinned African Americans with white features (Akbar, 1997, Leary, 2005; Russell, 1992).



Leary connects to this by stating that this is an example of the adoption of the master's value system through her category of "racist socialization". She states:

At this value system's foundation is the belief that white, and all things associated with whiteness, are superior; and that black, and all things associated with blackness, are inferior. Through the centuries of slavery and the decades of institutionalized oppression that followed, many African Americans have, in essence, been socialized to be something akin to white racists. Many African Americans have adopted the attitudes and views of white, racist America. Some African Americans both mold themselves to accommodate white prejudices and endeavor to adopt white standards (Leary, 2005, p.139).

Having this unique socialization experience due to having systematic and traumatic programming of inferiority throughout slavery, African Americans have adopted this inferiority psychologically, intellectually, emotionally and spiritually which at times has rendered them worthless and purposeless in their own eyes and in the eyes of larger society (Reid, 2004; Latif, 1994; Akbar, 1997).

#### Interpersonal / Community Effects

The types of patterns that fall under the interpersonal/ community effects category are more interpersonal in nature. The patterns or manifestations named are damaging to the larger community of African Americans and effectively destroys or negatively effects relationships between African Americans and other racial groups.

One of Akbar's major contributions to this category is his discussion of leadership and how slavery negatively affected the strong development of African Americans' trust in indigenous leadership. He states:

Slave narratives and historical accounts are full of descriptions of atrocities brought against anyone who exemplified real leadership capability. The slave holders realized that their power and control over the slaves was dependent upon the absence of any indigenous leadership among the slaves. Any slave who began to emerge as a natural head, that is one oriented toward survival of the whole

body, was identified early and was either eliminated, isolated, killed, or ridiculed. In his or her place was put a leader who had been carefully picked, trained, and tested to stand only for the master's welfare. They furthered the cause of the master and frustrated the cause of the slave (Akbar, 1997, p. 9).

Enslaved African Americans learned to view indigenous leadership from within the slave community with suspicion as they were labeled "uppity" or "arrogant" and the entire slave community was held responsible for the actions of these indigenous leaders who challenged the slave system (Akbar, 1997, P. 9). Akbar contends that African Americans have been conditioned to mistrust African American leadership and instead support leadership that supports the status quo and continuing system of racism (p. 10-11).

Connected to the pattern of mistrusting indigenous leadership is the manifestation of community division, which also has its roots in slavery. This pattern can easily be understood by the old adage "divide and conquer" (Akbar, 1997, p. 16). Slave masters created social divisions among the slaves, often by skin color, providing the "house slaves," or those slaves who tended to the household needs, with greater responsibility and labor roles that were less physically demanding than those of "field slaves", or those slaves that worked the fields and crops. This is seen as one of the major roots of community division that continues to be seen in African American communities. Akbar states that though the divisive signifiers are different, perhaps showing up currently as the distinction and separation being created between poor/working class Blacks and the Black middle class, the division remains (p. 20). This division continues to manifest as a pattern of internalized racism when African American communities spend more time legitimizing separate goals, such as class and educational achievement rather than working on shared goals, such as racial equity and liberation (p.19).

Leary and Akbar, and other theorists agree that more connections must be made to the chattel slavery roots of internalized racism and maladaptive beliefs and behaviors that still exist in African American communities and that continue to be transmitted across generations (Akbar, 1997, p.25; Leary, 2005, p. 147). Leary is clear to state that it is foolish to believe that every example of these patterns are a result of post traumatic slave syndrome. Though, she still believes that it is important to examine the connections that directly relate to the experience of enslaved African American ancestors (Leary, 2005, p. 147). Both theorists posit that because these behaviors noted above are causing harm to the positive development of the intellectual, psychological, and spiritual development of the African American community, it is important to explore these theories and create change (Leary, 2005, p. 147). An additional theoretical framework that explores the roots and impact of internalized racism is what I am calling the colonization psychology framework.

### Colonization Psychology

The colonization psychology framework draws together three prominent theorists, Albert Memmi, Frantz Fanon, and Paulo Freire. The combination of these theorists provides a framework that explores the African American psychological perspective as a result of living in a colonized or oppressed state. Though these theorists do not use the exact terminology internalized racism, these theorists speak of colonization, and a colonized or oppressed psyche of people who have been oppressed. Their perspectives on colonization can deepen our understanding of internalized racism for Blacks and African Americans.

From a historical perspective, though not indigenous to the United States land area, African Americans can be seen as a colonized group in some form. Their land was not invaded and colonized by an outside force, but they were forcibly removed from their native land and their culture(s) were ignored, stripped, and made mockery of during chattel slavery. Additionally, systemic racism can be compared to continued colonization. Memmi and Fanon describe the colonized experience as similar to a system of racism, as will be shown in this section, and Friere speaks of “the oppressed” group, which fits the role in which African Americans play in a system of racism (Memmi, 1965; Fanon, 1967; Friere, 1970). These two reasons provide connection to the experience of African Americans and their internalization of racism or as Memmi and Fanon discuss, the internalization of colonization.

### Colonization Psychology and Internalized Racism

The experience of the colonized/oppressed, as described Freire, is one of injustice, exploitation, oppression, and violence by their oppressors (Freire, 1970, p. 43). The systems of the oppressors deny the oppressed “liberty” (Memmi, 1965, p. 86), dehumanize the oppressed (Freire, 1970, p. 43), and make the colonized believe that they are not free to choose between being colonized and not being colonized. (Memmi, 1965, p. 86) The colonized are weakened by their situation and the weaknesses build on one another to create more problems. (Memmi 115) As Memmi (1965) states:

We have no idea what the colonized would have been without colonization, but we certainly see what has happened as a result of it. To subdue and exploit, the colonizer pushed the colonized out of the historical and social, cultural and technical current (p. 114).

The experience of the colonized is one that at first is physically limiting which then becomes psychologically limiting.

The psyche of the oppressed is strongly affected in a system of colonization. Both Memmi and Fanon say that the material limitations and limited freedom causes a psychological impact on the colonized, thus creating a self-fulfilling prophecy, or the colonized believing (and eventually) acting out the very things that the oppressors say about them, even though they are not true (Memmi, 1965; Fanon, 1967). Additionally, the colonized tend to embrace a “fear of freedom” as Freire names the belief that they, the colonized, cannot achieve, survive, or function without the colonizer (p. 47). This belief leads them to adopt the guidelines and to seek after the image of the colonizer or oppressor, and secures them to the role of the oppressed or colonized (p. 46-47). Friere (1965) explains the limiting psychological impact this places on the oppressed when he says:

...the oppressed, who have adapted to the structure of domination in which they are immersed, and have become resigned to it, are inhibited from waging the struggle for freedom so long as they feel incapable of running the risks it requires (p. 47).

The oppressed find themselves afraid to challenge their own oppression. From this, both Freire and Fanon discuss the development of an inferiority complex in the oppressed and a duality that exists deep within their psyche, that leaves them conflicted and wanting a more authentic existence that reflects their own beliefs, rather than those of the oppressor, but they fear moving away from the beliefs they have internalized (Freire, 1965; Fanon, 1967).

One of the main patterns that is mentioned by all three theorists is that of wanting to assimilate or adopt the colonizer or oppressor’s cultural standards, appearance and

order and that assimilation is encouraged and rewarded by the oppressor. This connects back to the duality that exists within the colonized, the want to be like the oppressor, but at the same time wanting to reject that which oppresses him (Memmi, 1965; Fanon, 1967; Freire, 1970). Freire says this duality and restriction can cause patterns of horizontal violence in the oppressed in which they attack other members of the oppressed group for the most insignificant reasons.

The colonized man will first manifest this aggressiveness which has been deposited in his bones against his own people. It is possible that in this behavior they are once more manifesting their duality. Because the oppressor exists within their oppressed comrades, when they attack those comrades they are indirectly attacking the oppressor as well (Freire, 1970, p. 62).

And at the same time, because the colonized are so self-hating, there is an attraction towards the oppressor and his way of life (Freire, 1970, p. 62). This level of attraction to the oppressor and wish to assimilate combined with a rejection of self produces a self-depreciation and a distrust of self in the colonized and dependence on the colonizer (Freire, 1970, p. 63; Memmi, 1965, p. 121).

The description of colonization psychology above can be linked to many of the experiences of Blacks and African Americans in a system of institutional racism and manifestations of internalized racism as stated in the general overview section. African Americans adoption and assimilation of White standards of beauty, feelings of inferiority (Gainor, 1992; Parmer, 2004; Poupart, 2003; Hill, 1995) horizontal violence toward other African Americans (Poupart, 2003; Duran & Duran, 1995), lack of agency and feeling of powerlessness (Love, 1998) - all are examples of manifestations that match up with patterns exhibited by those described as colonized by the three theorists cited.

All of these psychological factors adding up point to the spiritual death, or complete resignation of the colonized (Memmi, 1965, p. 151). Finding themselves in this psychological state, Fanon (1967) states that at this point, one of two things can happen within the oppressed – either the oppressed will resign themselves to the oppression and attempt to be like the oppressor or assimilate acting out a number of patterns of the colonized mind, or as Memmi (1965) states, “reconquer all the dimensions which colonization tore away from him”, which would point toward liberation (p. 120)

## Liberation

### Liberation Goal

Just as there is much indecision about how to define internalized racism, there is just as much confusion and discussion when comparing the thinking and theorizing about the concept of liberation. Is it a process or a goal? Is it something that can ever be achieved by individuals while living in a society rooted in racism or must the society be healed of racism first before individuals can achieve personal liberation? If individuals are physically free, why then are they not mentally liberated? Is liberation something that must be taken or can it be given? When thinking about liberation and internalized racism, these questions further confused the movement of African Americans out of internalized racism. Though this review of literature is not an extensive look into theories of liberation, this section is meant to provide an overview of theoretical frameworks about liberation.

According to the theorists explored, liberation can be seen as a destination and goal, as well as, a process or journey (Ruth, 2006; Love, 2000; Love et. al, 2008). As a

goal, there is an end picture of liberation that we are striving as a culture to reach. The liberation goal as described by theorists consists of both the physical and mental liberation of individuals despite their race or ethnicity. The physical liberation consists of the fair and just access to rights, resources, shared power, dignity and respect that each human beings deserves (Ruth, 2006; Bell, 1997; Love, 2000; Love et. al, 2008; Pharr, 2000; Rosado, 2007). Additionally, a picture of a society where relationships, communities, organizations are characterized by fairness and equity gets painted for the goal of liberation (Love et. al, 2008). For African Americans, after centuries of overt and covert refusal by predominately white institutional structures who hold political, economic, and ideological power, that picture of physical liberation would be a relief. Many of the theorists note, however, this final goal of societal liberation is not possible without the mental liberation of the complete society, both People of Color and White people. Mental liberation is embodied when all forms of internalized subordination exhibited by people of color and internalized domination exhibited by white people ends. This includes: racial groups having pride in themselves and members of their group without basing that pride in the comparison of the oppressed or oppressor group and can acknowledge individual and group intelligence; creativity; courage; goodness for both the oppressor and racially oppressed groups in society will embody the mental liberation goal (Ruth, 2006). Lastly, Love et. al (2008) states that mental liberation will be realized when we are able to consistently hold ourselves with compassion, love, and validation, nurture our individual joy, gratitude and vision and can take care of ourselves as we fight to transform oppressive systems (p. 2). Multiple theorists state the belief that internalized oppression is “the glue” that is keeping a system of oppression in place, therefore, it is



important to dismantle systems of internalized oppression, including racism, along side of the fight to dismantle systems of institutionalized oppression (Love, 1998; Ruth, 2006).

Other theorists state that the goal of liberation does not just happen overnight and instead, there is a journey toward liberation for both the individual, as well as the larger society. The journey might entail developing a critical consciousness, practicing acts of liberation, community organizing around particular issues and much more (Harro, 2000; Pharr, 2000; Ruth, 2006). This paper mostly examines internalized racism from the individual perspective; therefore, this section will talk mostly about the process of liberation from an individual perspective.

### Liberatory Consciousness

Many theoretical models and authors that talk about need to have a liberatory consciousness or a liberation psychology as a foundation for an individual being in a process of liberation (Moane, 1999; Love, 2000; Ruth, 2006; Rosado, 2007). This liberatory or “critical consciousness”, as named by Freire (1970), allows for individuals to live their lives in a hopeful, yet critical way, despite the institutionally oppressive system that surrounds them (Love, 2000). This consciousness is one where the individual is able to have awareness of or perceive the oppression around them, understand the dynamics of and develop an analysis of the oppression, then respond to the oppression with a course of action that contributes to the transformation of the society toward the goal of liberation (Harro, 2000; Love, 2000; Ruth, 2006 Rosado, 2007). For African Americans and other racially oppressed social identity groups, understanding and confrontation of the internalized thoughts and behaviors learned through living in a system of racism is the starting point for transformation. (Ruth, 2006) And only with that

this transformation, acknowledgement and commitment to daily enactments of liberation by individuals will the society begin to move toward a goal of liberation.

### Psychology of Slavery and Liberation

Looking again at the theoretical writing of the psychology of slavery framework, theorists agree on many points that would encapsulate a process of liberation from psychological slavery. Both Leary and Akbar say that the knowledge of self of African American culture is key beginning a process of liberation from internalized racism (Leary, 2005; Akbar,1997). Leary, specifically, states that replacing a racist socialization, the negative racial socialization about African American culture that is often learned in a racist culture, with a more honest, complete and strength driven perspective is a major factor when learning about self (p.115). Both theorists also identify that it is important to celebrate the African American culture, without denigrating other cultures because that celebration is a way to heal past wounds and lift self-esteem (Leary 2005, Akbar 1997). Both authors also name courage as a major factor in beginning and continuing a liberation journey in the midst of an oppressive society. They state that individuals must be brave about taking responsibility for the “inner world” of emotions, health, diet and stress, and that bravery must be claimed when claiming mental liberation because the very nature of psychological slavery sets up the illusion that individuals are already free (Leary, 2005; Akbar, 1997). To confront that illusion, Akbar (1997) states that individuals must be courageous to look beyond the illusion and face the loneliness that might come from movement toward liberation (p. 40). Connected to this, both authors name unity in the larger African American community as a major factor impacting the

success of a process of liberation and that coalitions must be formed because it is impossible to get free alone. Akbar disagrees with some of the liberation theorists when he states that the “elimination of white racism is not required for liberation of the mind” (p. 35), but acknowledges it that it cannot be done without the help of others African Americans.

### Colonization Psychology and Liberation

Though it is made to seem that the colonized are destined to remain in their oppressed position, Memmi, Freire, and Fanon note that change is possible and point toward ways in which the colonized can begin to change their mindset and situation. All point to a need for the colonized to realize the ways in which they have been dehumanized by the systems that have oppressed them. “The struggle begins with men’s recognition that they have been destroyed. Propaganda, management, manipulation – all arms of domination – cannot be the instruments of their rehumanization” (Freire, 1970, p. 68). This is an important to note because in working toward decolonization, the same tools that were used to oppress cannot be effectively used to liberate. A change in action, attitude, thought about self-concept is needed. Also, the theorists agree that though the oppressed individual’s attempts at assimilation are attempts at survival, colonization can not be tolerated indefinitely and that attempts at liberation must be pursued actively, consciously and attacked boldly by the colonized (Memmi, 1965; Freire, 1970). The theorists name “self-recovery” or movement toward to an authentic nature and the rejection of the current colonized image of self (Freire, 1970) as an essential step in liberation. They also agree that a greater awareness of the causes for their colonization and a unification of those that identify similarly must be created

(Memmi, 1965; Fanon, 1970). Finally, this framework names that the colonized will transform into some thing new and will cease defining himself through the categories of his colonizer (Memmi, 1970). Theorists within this framework agree with contemporary scholarship of Ruth (2006) asserting that in order for true liberation to happen, a complete disappearance of colonization must occur (Memmi, 1970; Ruth, 2006).

After exploring the ways that two theoretical frameworks define and discuss both internalized racism and liberation, exploration of the racial identity development theories offer a framework to assess the actual process from internalized racism to liberation. Racial identity development stage models theorize that movement from less conscious of internalized racism to more consciousness of internalized racism is available to Black and African Americans if on a process of liberation.

#### Nigrescence Racial Identity Development Models

Helms' (1990) influential book, *Black and White Racial Identity: Theory, Research, and Practice*, cites that racial identity development models began prominently appearing in the fields of counseling psychology and psychotherapy at the beginning of the 1970s after the work of the Civil Rights Movement. (Helms, 1990; Coakley & Chapman, 2009) She writes, "theorists were attempting to present a framework by which practitioners could be more sensitive to the racial issues that were hypothesized to influence the therapy process" (p. 9), or in effect, understand the process by which a racial identity could be developed. Nigrescence racial identity development models specifically "attempt to explain the various ways in which Blacks can identify (or not identify) with other Blacks and/or adopt or abandon identities resulting from racial

victimization.” (Helms, 1990, p. 5) Prominent Nigrescence racial identity development theorists include Cross (1991), Jackson (1976; 2001), and Cross and Fhagen-Smith (2001). Nigrescence racial identity development models are primarily stage models where “theorists proposed that individuals could potentially move from the least healthy, White-defined stages of identity, to most healthy, self-defined racial transcendence.” (Helms, 1990, p.17) Tatum (1997) confirms this stating, “racial identity development theory essentially describes a process of moving from internalized racism to a position of empowerment based on a positively affirmed sense of racial identity” (p.92) which situates the theories as a firm ground from which to explore the collected data for this study.

Jackson’s Black Identity Development model is most appropriate for this inquiry because in its original presentation, Jackson states that there was a problem of a “lack of relevance to the education and counseling” for Black students (Jackson, 1976, p. 2). Meant to instruct “educators, behavioral scientists, and change agents” the use of Jackson’s theory as a framework seems sensible in the field of social justice education. (Jackson, 2001, p. 10) Jackson’s original model theorized “ that the construct(s) that Blacks use for making sense of themselves; their environment; and /or the interaction between the two, is heavily influenced by the Black person’s conscious or unconscious response to the onslaught of individual, institutional, or cultural racism in this society.” (Jackson, 1976, p. 20-21) Using Jackson’s theory as a framework to explore the experiences of internalized racism in Black and African American women allows for a thorough view into relevancy and application of the theory.

The Black Identity Development model was conceived as an organizing tool that would describe the perspectives and experiences that black people hold about their racial identity or their blackness (Jackson, 2001). This fits in well with an exploration of understanding how internalized racism affects African American lives and identities because internalized racism has the potential to be a major influence on how black people see themselves and how they are seen by the world. Before moving into the discussion of the identity models and their discussion of internalized racism, it is important to highlight the language that is used by the authors to differentiate between race and ethnicity. Jackson states that though his model originally was meant to talk about Black identity, it does not consider international perspectives and so the terminology African American identity might be a more accurate term to discuss the identity development that he theorizes about because it is from a United States perspective (Jackson, 2001). Like with the complete dissertation, I will be using Black and African American interchangeably in this section.

In originally constructing his model, Bailey Jackson states that he wanted to understand how life experiences were affecting the way that black people saw themselves, responded to their world and with each other, and how it affected the motives and behavior patterns of black people (Jackson, 2001, p. 11). This is important to note when thinking about internalized racism because, as he states, identity or the way that someone sees their identity can contribute to the “motives and the behavior patterns” that they enact in the world and how they may see themselves (Jackson, 2001, p. 11). This links directly to internalized racism because as stated earlier, internalized racism can be actively manifested in behavioral patterns and understood through the attitude and

understanding African Americans might have about themselves. The exploration into this theory offers the marriage between the historical perspectives of Akbar and Leary and the psychological theorizing of Fanon, Freire, and Memmi, by noting the way in which an individual's growth, development, and self perception is shaped by the events that happen in his or her life development.

When looking at the model, the question that was asked was, "where in the model does an attitude or behavior that could be signified as internalized racism surface?" After quickly reviewing the model, the discussion of that question will be noted.

#### Overview of the Model

Jackson's Black Identity Development Model (2001) consists of five stages, Naïve, Acceptance, Resistance, Redefinition, and Internalization. The *Naïve* stage is described as the "absence of social consciousness or identity" (Jackson, 2001, p. 15), the *Acceptance* stage is described as one where the acceptance of the majority culture or White description of Blackness and Black culture is accepted by Black people in this stage, the *Resistance* stage is defined as the stage where the majority culture's definition of black culture is challenged by individuals in this stage. The *Redefinition* stage is signified by the reaffirming of the individual's sense of Blackness and Black culture and lastly, *Internalization* is the stage in which the redefined racial identity is integrated in to all areas of one's self identity (Jackson, 2001, p.15). Jackson notes that the transitions between the stages are just as important as the stages themselves because that is the point in which the individual experiences contradictions in their experience that would move them to encourage movement to a new stage (Jackson, 2001, p.16).

## Black Identity and Internalized Racism

When examining at the Black Identity Development model, attitudes and behaviors that can be associated with internalized racism first appear in the Acceptance stage (Jackson, 2001, p. 19). Jackson states that in the stage transition between Naïve and Acceptance, individuals can begin to take on societal beliefs about their own racial group as their racial ideology begins to form (p.19). Though not within the scope of the study, participant's stories of the racism they faced in schools or larger society may have begun the formation of their racial ideology. In the United States where racist ideology is institutionalized, this means the internalizing of messages that Blackness is bad or less than, and that White is seen as normal, good, important and powerful and better than others. (Jackson, 2001, p. 19) Jackson states that an individual in the Acceptance stage might consciously or unconsciously embrace an ideology of White racial domination and has internalized the negative messages of what it means to be Black in the United States. A person in this stage is described as someone who might seek resources, approval, self worth or power by colluding and conforming to "White social, cultural and institutional standards" (p. 19). The conscious or unconscious acceptance of this ideology might cause the rejection of all things that are considered Black or associated with Black culture. In describing some of the behavioral and attitudinal manifestations of this ideology, Jackson states that the Black individual might "avoid interactions with other Blacks and desire interactions with whites" (Jackson, 2001, p. 20) and reinforce those actions with such beliefs in racial meritocracy, the absence of racial oppression, and the belief that Black



individuals must learn to assimilate or acculturate in order to survival in the current social structure (Jackson, 2001, p. 20).

Jackson (2001) is clear to state that the Black individual in the Acceptance stage is not destined to stay at this stage forever. Inevitably, transition will occur when events, or “racial incidents” (p. 21) that cause cognitive dissonance or disrupts the individual’s worldview begin to happen in succession and cumulatively build. This causes the individual to move into a transition stage where they begin to acknowledge their own collusion and the damaging effects of such a consciousness. After the transition stage the individual will begin the process of halting their collusion with a racist system and regain a sense of personal power which they then use against the system and realize that the system will respond with change. (p. 22) This individual is now in the resistance stage and beginning a process of liberation from their internalized racism.

### Black Identity and Liberation

As a part of their liberation process in Jackson’s Black Identity Development model, the individual in the resistance stage begins to question the values, moral codes, and truths as determined by white culture (Jackson, 2001, p. 22). Racism is recognized as a complex system and the covert ways in which racism affects the lives of Black people is recognized. Jackson states that in this resistance stage the individual might also experience a growing hostility toward people, who support the system of racism in overt and covert ways, be they Black or White (p. 22). The most important acknowledgement of the beginning of the process of liberation is the ceasing of the individual with his or her own victimization or collusion with racism (p. 22).

Liberation continues when the person begins to question and assess what their racial group identity means for them individually. This inquiry is that stage transition that moves them from Resistance to Redefinition. In Redefinition, the individual experiences their Black identity from a place of pride and not a place of victimhood. They are no longer interested in assimilating into white culture and understand that they have power even in a system of racism. Lastly, as the person begins to integrate some of their newly developed values, attitudes and behaviors, Jackson names this stage as Internalization (p. 24) At this point of liberation, the individual feels very secure in their Black identity and does not feel that it is necessary to safeguard their Black identity but recognizes the need to nurture that sense of self (p. 26). Additionally, some Black people in the Internalization stage adopts a worldview that is multicultural and blends “compatible cultural perspectives” of others that are not Black. (p. 26)

Jackson’s model normalizes internalized racism as part of an identity development process. The underlying assumption Jackson’s theory states that African Americans will go through a process of wrestling with internalized racism and behaviorally manifest internalized negative beliefs about themselves and about other African Americans as a result of living in a racist society. However, this framework does not provide a thorough understanding of how internalized racism is taken in; what the psychological experiences are of the oppressed, and what behaviors may result from internalized racism. These gaps prevent a comprehensive understanding of internalized racism that would move the path toward liberation closer. The racial identity models, though effective at stating that racism is something that can be overcome, are not clear in providing information or examples of how racism might be overcome.

## CHAPTER 3

### METHODOLOGY

#### Introduction

This chapter describes the methodology used to conduct the current qualitative phenomenological study. This chapter includes sections on a rationale for the methodology, a description of the research design, population and sample, data collection, data management, analytic plan, and information on ethical considerations, such as validity and reliability, and limitations of the study.

To briefly restate the purpose, this qualitative study explored the experiences of African American and Black women in a process of liberation from internalized attitudes and behaviors associated with racism. The research question guiding this study is: “What is (are) the experiences of African American and Black women engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism?” Secondary questions that helped guide the design of the study and construct initial interview questions were: 1) If individuals have recognized negative psychological and behavioral impacts of racism in their lives, how do they define and experience that impact? 2) How have the participants confronted negative psychological and behavioral impacts of internalized racism in their lives? and 3) How have they moved forward in a process of liberation?

This current study examines 11 Black and African American women who have noticed, named, and begun to confront their own experiences with internalized racism. The study explores ways that the participants understand the phenomenon of internalized racism, ways that internalized racism has impacted their lives, their process of releasing

their psychological and behavioral ties to internalized racism and movement toward liberation. The study employs a qualitative method of in-depth phenomenological interviews with all 11 participants, and analyzes the data collected through thematic analysis and participant profiles.

### Overall Approach and Rationale

#### Research Paradigms

In order to understand how individuals understand their experience of the phenomenon of internalized racism and liberatory process, a systematic, empirical strategy that provided a means for individuals to describe, report and provide their understanding of the subject was needed (Locke, Spirduso, & Silverman, 1998). Qualitative research methods provided that opportunity. Qualitative research is a process that involves analyzing and exploring a phenomenon through participants' stories and perspectives in order to discover meaningful patterns to create a clearer understanding of social or human problems. (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003; Creswell, 2003). The qualitative methodologies in this study employed a phenomenological philosophy that allowed me, as the researcher, and the participants to question the function and essence of their lived experience of internalized racism and more importantly, their experiences with liberation. (Denzin, 2005; Seidman, 2006).

Additionally, I chose qualitative research methods because it was important to find research methods in tune with my personal philosophy and that satisfied my ethical beliefs that each person's story is valuable and their voice and words should be respected. (Etherington, 2004; Seidman, 2006). I embrace a social constructivist perspective that

invites us to see our world and our social identities as socially constructed and pay attention to how identity and meaning can be created through our experiences, stories, and behavior (Auerbach, 2003; Etherington, 2004). As a researcher, my own interest in having the participants construct knowledge from the complexity of their own experience—not just have their experience recorded and measured—drew me to qualitative methods (Etherington, 2004; Kvale, 2009). Qualitative research allowed the intricacies of participants' stories and experiences to contribute to the knowledge that is being constructed and offered participants to practice manifestations of liberation to match the process that each of the participants are constructing in her life (Auerbach, 2003). As the study will suggest, internalized racism often took away their voices, and the opportunity to express their truth through the study continued to offer them movement in their process of liberation.

### The Importance of Power and Voice

Auerbach (2003) lists four ways that qualitative research methods contributed to the power sharing that I wanted to create between me, as the researcher, and the participants. First, the research method focused on the voices of the participants, therefore, making them the experts about their own experience. Second, the research was hypothesis generating, or it produced further questions as each interview was conducted, rather than hypothesis testing, acknowledging that there are variations in experience rather than relying on the belief that every participant's experience would be the same. Third, there was a collaborative partnership between the researcher and the participants, making it more likely that the outcome of the research would be relevant in the lives of

the participants. Finally, the qualitative research should include a reflexive quality that allows the researcher to examine their own biases that increases the probability that the data collection and research process will not exploit or oppress the participants (Auerbach, 2003).

At the heart of my selection of research methods was my interest in others' stories and my hope to provide individuals with an empowered voice because all of our stories are of worth (Seidman, 2006) though we live in a society that does not allow for shared power (Adams et al., 2007). In researching the experiences of African American and Black women about their internalized racism, I wanted to use methods that voice and value their stories because the research method would provide a direct contradiction to their experience of their internalized racism. As the data analysis will show, participants spoke of feeling like they had less worth because of their experience with internalized racism and using the in-depth phenomenological data collection method allowed for me to accomplish my hope for a study that would have integrity to their voices and stories.

In order to value and honor the voices of the participants, I allowed them to define how they understood internalized racism in their own words, but at the same time, as the researcher, I wanted to make linkages between their experiences as a group. In order to accomplish this, I employed the in-depth interview data collection method and inductive analysis method - the phenomenological approach because I wanted to deeply understand the experience of African American and Black women struggling with internalized racism, and the inductive analysis method because each person's story points to clearer thinking about the experience of internalized racism and liberation. The combined data collection and analysis methods produce insight about a process of liberation by

providing a look into my participants lives in order to potentially instruct others in their struggle with internalized racism.

### Researcher Reflexivity

It was always my intent and desire to be thoughtful about the fact that I, as the researcher, shared the same social race identity, and possibly similar experiences of internalized racism and liberation as the participants. I wanted to devise a way to prevent my own experiences from casting a shadow over the experiences of the participants selected for the study. In an attempt to be conscious and thoughtful about the use of my own voice—and to separate my own personal experience of internalized racism as a Black woman from that of my developing thinking of the phenomenon as a researcher—I included myself as one of the participants in a form of data collection that I am calling reflexive autoethnographic interviewing (Auerbach, 2003; Davies, 2008; Given, 2008).

Autoethnographic data collection offers the researcher the opportunity to reflect on the phenomenon being studied and gaze back and forth on aspects of their personal experience and the phenomenon being studied (Given, 2008). Including myself as a participant allowed me to be reflective about my own process with internalized racism and also as a researcher to watch my process move as I listened to the stories of my participants and honor the complexity of human life as the participants and I tried to make sense of the phenomenon being studied (Etherington, 2004; Given, 2008). It also was a process of noticing my own liberation and thinking about liberation in the context of a racist society.

My experience of being an African American woman in a racist society has led me to this topic. When I had the time and information to look at my own internalized racism, my interest grew in wanting to understand others' process of liberation and compare it to my own. Additionally, I had hoped that some insights that other participants would provide would help me along in my own process of liberation and development.

I am deeply connected to this knowledge because internalized racism affects me and is a part of my own life story. As I continue to struggle with my own internalized racism, I am engaging in my own process to liberation. Recognizing that, as a researcher, my perspective is already influencing the reporting of the data, I wanted to reduce the risk of overlaying my story onto others as an attempt to create more trustworthiness and rigor in the process. Therefore, I completed a similar process as the other participants in the study, which will be discussed in the section on data collection.

My process of collecting my data as a participant included completing a participant questionnaire, recruiting a close friend and colleague who studies race and racism to conduct the three life history interviews. Using the same open-ended questions used with other participants, I was interviewed over a series of 3 weeks. During the time that I was interviewed, I was collecting the data from other participants. Like other participants, I was assigned a pseudonym.

## Data Collection

### Introduction

Phenomenology seeks to grasp the meaning of human experience through a comprehensive search (van Manen, 2000); therefore, the method of in-depth



phenomenological interviewing combines life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing informed by assumptions drawn from phenomenology (Seidman, 2006). In this study, I used an open-ended interview protocol and during the interviews, follow-up questions were asked to clarify the responses of the participants. The goal was have the participant reconstruct her experience with internalized racism and with liberation (Seidman, 2006). In his book, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research : A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences* (2006), Irving Seidman explains why the process of having participants make meaning of their experiences in context of their life histories helps bring more depth to the phenomenon being studied. He says,

Making sense or making meaning requires that the participants look at how the factors in their lives interacted to bring them to their present situation. It also requires that they look at their present experience in detail and within the context in which it occurs. The combination of exploring the past to clarify the events that led participants to where they are now, and describing the concrete details of their present experience, establishes conditions for reflecting upon what they are now doing in their lives. (p. 18)

In-depth phenomenological interviewing has at its root “an interest in understanding the lived experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience” (Seidman, 2006, p. 9). Again, giving voice to the experience of the participants in the study challenges the silencing power of internalized racism and allows for their experiences with internalized racism and liberation to be put in the context of their lives and personal stories, which is the way to meaning (Seidman, 2006). The data collection method combined life-history interviewing and focused, in-depth interviewing that were conducted through three, 90-minute interviews.

## Sample Selection

In order to find participants for the study, a combination of “convenience sampling” and “purposeful sampling” (Creswell, 1998) was used. An introductory email (Appendix A) with information about the study and a questionnaire (Appendix B) was sent to the Social Justice Training Institute listserv, the ACPA’s Commission for Social Justice Educators listserv, and the Social Justice Education listserv, where Black and African American women who have consciousness or awareness about internalized racism may frequent. Employing a snowball sampling method, emails with the same information were sent to friends and colleagues who were instructed to recommend colleagues or friends who they thought might fit into the research population. In the initial email and request for participants, the word “internalized racism”/“psychological effect of institutionalized racism” and “liberation”/“ways to live beyond/outside of the internalized racism” were used to explain the focus of the research and attract interested participants.

## Instrumentation

In order to collect qualified participants or participants who had some awareness of what internalized racism is and who had some consciousness of the phenomenon and how it manifests in their own life, interested individuals completed a potential participant questionnaire form. Interested participants were asked to complete the questionnaire consent form (Appendix B) and the potential participant questionnaire form (Appendix C) that collects demographic information and lists examples of manifestations of

internalized racism and liberation (Akbar, 1996; Bivens, 2005; Bryant, 2000; Flynn, 2000; Hill, 1995; hooks, 1995; Norrington-Sands, 2002 ).

The questionnaire, which I created, consisted of 17 questions and gathered contact, demographic, and ancestral information on the potential participant who chose to complete it. In the assessment of potential participants, I sought to gather a participant sample that varied in age, and all identified as Black or African American, but who were born and raised in the U.S. though potentially having ancestry who were born outside of the U.S. A main focus of the questionnaire was the assessment of the potential participants awareness of manifestations of internalized racism and liberation in their lives. The questionnaire listed two questions that allowed participants to check off specific manifestations of internalized racism (Question 15) and liberation (Question 16) that they currently feel or in the past have felt, thought, or experienced as cited by the literature. Examples of manifestations given by theorists (Akbar, 1996; Bivens, 2005; Bryant, 2000; Flynn, 2000; Hill, 1995; hooks, 1995; Norrington-Sands, 2002 ) were reworded for clarity by the researcher after feedback from the pilot study.

This questionnaire provided insight about the participants' awareness of and experience of internalized racism, and based on their responses on Question 16, the potentiality of their participation in the next stage of the study, the interviews about their experience with challenging internalized racism through a process of liberation in their own life. Because internalized racism is such a vast phenomenon with many behavioral and emotional manifestations, the representation of internalized racism could not fully be explored on the questionnaire instrument. Because the focus of the study is on the process of liberation from internalized racism, and Question 15 listed manifestations of

internalized racism, if a participant completing the questionnaire checked at least one of the manifestations listed on Question 15, their questionnaire could be eligible to qualify for continued exploration. The vastness of liberation could not be fully explored either, I demarcated that if a participant marked at least half of the manifestations of liberation, the participant was moving beyond a consciousness dominated by internalized racism. Therefore, that awareness made them a desirable participant in the study. Fewer marks in the manifestations of internalized racism section (Question 15) did not mean that the participant was a poor candidate for the study, but some of the example manifestations of liberation question pointed to their awareness about how internalized racism might have affected their life. This shaped and transformed the second interview conducted with the participant to talk more thoroughly about some of the examples that were used in the questionnaire.

### In-depth Interviewing

The interviews followed the model of Irving Seidman's in-depth interviewing model as described in his writing, *Interviewing as Qualitative Research: A Guide for Researchers in Education and the Social Sciences*. Following the model, the interviews were conducted face to face and lasted approximately 90 minutes. A total of 33 interviews were conducted and each followed an a set of interview questions developed to evoke answers that corresponded to my research question (Appendix G).

In the first interview, the participants were asked to reconstruct early experiences in their families, in school, with friends, in their neighborhood, and at work. Because the study sought to understand participants experience of liberation from internalized racism, this interview provides a context for their understanding and consciousness about

internalized racism (Seidman, 2006). In the second interview participants were asked to concentrate on the concrete details of their present lived experience of liberation.

Participants were asked to reconstruct details of experiences and manifestations of liberation to further add a context of their experience and understanding of internalized racism and the presence of liberation in their current experience (Seidman, 2006). In the third interview, participants were asked to reflect on the meaning of their experience of acknowledging internalized racism in their lives and their process of liberation.

The in-depth phenomenological study included 11 participant voices. This number allowed for diversity in experience, identity, perspective, and still be a manageable amount of data to analyze. In the phenomenological in-depth interviewing process, a participant would be able to contextualize her experiences with stories of historical and life events, explanation of how their gender, sexual orientation, class, and other social identities might have affected their experience with internalized racism and provide information about the importance of intersecting social identities which is a foundation of oppression theory (Seidman, 2006).

In his writing about in-depth phenomenological qualitative studies, Seidman (2006) speaks of two concepts, sufficiency and saturation in regard to the size of participant samples. He asks the researcher to consider two points—the size of the participant sample (it should be sufficient to provide insight to the phenomenon being studied), and saturation, the point at which the participants begin sharing similar stories and experience. Both of those points were fulfilled with a sample size of 11 people, which produced a concise and clear study with depth and adequate saturation.

## Pilot Study

In order to test the effectiveness of the methodologies that I chose for the study, I conducted a mini-pilot study where I specifically gathered feedback about the participant pre-questionnaire, interview guides, and effectiveness of the three interview structure. For the pilot study, I sent the email and Frequently Asked Questions about the study (Appendix A), pre-questionnaire informed consent (Appendix B), and participant pre-questionnaire (APPENDIX C) to 12 local women whom I visually identified as African American/Black women who ranged in age, and asked them to read the Frequently Asked Questions sheet, complete the informed consent and participant pre-questionnaire and provide feedback on all three.

I received a response from five of the women who I contacted by email. As a result of those completed questionnaires and based on suggestions and edits from the pilot participants, I made a few adjustments to the wording for the manifestations listed in Questions 15 and 16 in order for them to read more clearly. Additionally, I made slight adjustments to the demographic information questions, such as giving an option to the participant to acknowledge their lack of knowledge about their ancestry who survived chattel slavery in the U.S. All of the women who completed the questionnaire spoke of its clarity and easiness to complete. The pilot questionnaire participants ranged from age 24 to age 68, mirroring the participants for the larger study. I realized that the questionnaire, though effective in weeding out those who have done no thinking about internalized racism or a process to liberation, was really only effective to find potential participants and could not really serve an assessment of previous knowledge of internalized racism prior to selecting a participant for an interview.

In order to test the interview guide to get a feel for the effectiveness and to develop a comfort with the three, 90-minute interview process, I selected one person from the individuals who completed the pre-questionnaire and conducted and audio recorded three, 90-minute interviews with her. Additionally, I kept a journal of my reflections of the pilot process and reflections after the interviews. After completing the pilot, I made several small adjustments to the interview guide.

For the three-interview process, I specifically chose a pilot participant with a lay(wo)man's understanding of oppression theory and who completed Questions 15 and 16 on the questionnaire with at least five of the manifestations of internalized racism and liberation checked off for each question. I thought by choosing this participant, her interview process might provide the most information about the effectiveness of the questions and the process itself to answer the research question(s). Additionally, in order to test the effectiveness of including my own voice in the study and the impact of the dual experience as researcher and participant, I completed interview one myself as a participant, and through that experience, I gained a deeper understanding of how the participants might struggle with some of the questions and concepts that I was putting forth in my larger study.

The pilot interviewing process yielded outcomes for me to keep in mind during the larger interview portion. First, defining internalized racism and a process of liberation is subjective to each person. During the interviews with the pilot participant, I realized she had consciousness of some manifestations of internalized racism from her past and in the present, and had begun a process of liberation with some of those manifestations. With other examples of manifestations of internalized racism, she did not feel she was as

consciously aware of them and struggled with a process of liberation in those areas. The interview made me ask the question as a researcher, “Am I looking for a particular “level” of liberation? And if so, how will that “level” be determined? Second, the pilot interview process helped me clarify that the interviews would be the way to have a clearer understanding of the participant’s understanding of internalized racism and liberation and the conclusions that I might draw about their “level” of liberation would only be contextualized within their life story experience.

Reflecting on my interview process during the pilot study, I noted that my language and reflection about liberation was very different from participants because my understanding of liberation is more nuanced. Reflecting on the research question (*What is/are the experiences of African American women engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism?*), the pilot interview process showed that the data collected from the larger study will be vast and varied. As defined by the study, the pilot participant and I were both engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism, and I learned that every process will look different, and it would be up to me as the researcher to cull the important themes and to make the connections to help bring clarity to the phenomenon of internalized racism and a process of liberation. During the pilot interviews, I realized that the interviewing guide questions were effective at keeping the interview focused, but many of the questions created were supporting questions and more information would be drawn from the exploration that I would do with the participant in the moment and about a particular story or event that they shared during the interview. Additionally, in previous discussions, I believed that the study needed to consist of only individuals who had ancestors who survived chattel slavery to assess and understand the



generational memory of cultural trauma as a root of internalized racism. After doing the pilot, I realized that I wanted to understand the various ways in which internalized racism is rooted, not just generationally as stated in the literature review; therefore, I chose to look for women born and raised in the United States with a variety of African diasporic ancestry.

### Sampling

After the collecting completed questionnaires, the potential participants were assessed based on their demographic information, as well as their answers to Questions 15 and Question 16. Seeking to have a sample that varied in age and participants who are aware of their own manifestations of internalized racism and process of liberation, assessment of this information provided the eligibility of individuals to participate in the in-depth interview study. Once selected for the interview portion of the study, each participant was assigned a pseudonym. As noted in the Table 1, most participants acknowledged between 5-9 manifestations of internalized racism out of 14 and 10-12 manifestations of liberation out of 12. One participant, Denise, checked only one internalized racism manifestation from the list provided but listed 10 out of 12 manifestations of liberation. She was included in the study because of the number of manifestations of liberation she checked off and my interest in her perspective. Her profile, included in the next chapter and summary in Chapter 6 will speak more to the reason for the difference in her response to the question of her acknowledgement of internalized racism in her life. The women that participated are self-identified African American/Black women in the U.S. across age ranges of 25 to 65.

Table 1. Stratification of Participants

<b>Name</b>	<b>Current Socio-economic Class Level</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Internalized Manifestations</b>	<b>Liberation Manifestations</b>
Marisa	Middle	39	7	13
Denise	Middle	43	1	10
Debra	Working	25	6	6
Stephanie	Upper Middle	39	5	10
Nicole	Lower middle	28	9	10
Earlene	Middle	60	5	12
Lauren	Middle	33	8	7
Liza	Middle	49	5	12
Glenda	Middle	56	7	11
Paula	Upper Middle	65	8	10
Tabitha	Middle	37	9	12

#### Data Collection, Management and Analysis

Once selected, all participants, including the researcher, were interviewed and digitally audio recorded three times for 90 minutes for a total of 4.5 hours each. Each of the interviews was transcribed verbatim in order to maintain the accuracy of the participants' stories. I listened to the recordings and followed transcripts to ensure that the audio was transcribed accurately. In order to keep the data confidential, the audio files, the transcripts, coding themes, and research memos were kept in computer files on a secure computer.

In qualitative research, Marshall and Rossman (1999) note that there are six stages to data analysis: 1) organizing the data, 2) generating categories, themes, and patterns, 3) coding the data, 4) testing the emergent understandings, 5) searching for alternative explanations, and 6) writing the report. I implemented this plan for my data collection. As a result of having a series of interviews with each participant, I began by organizing

and familiarizing myself with the interview data by re-reading the transcripts while re-listening to the audio recordings of early participant interviews. Additionally, as a result of multiple interviews with each participant, I was able to revisit stories told in the interviews and explore salient themes with other participants, testing my emergent understanding of the data that was collected. In order to accomplish a thorough analysis of the rich data collected from the participants, I looked for early themes that explained how participants made meaning of their experiences of internalized racism and liberation (Rossman & Rallis, 1998).

These steps lead to a grounded theory analysis method to further understand the data. In the process of the interviews with each participant, I noticed particular instances that were shared across interviews, and began to compare the experiences and instances across other interviews to create new ideas about the phenomenon of internalized racism and a process of liberation. (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003) As Merriam says, “The researcher begins with a particular incident from an interview, field notes, or document and compares it with another incident... These comparisons lead to tentative categories that are then compared to each other and to other instances.” (Merriam, 1998, p. 159) This type of analysis is likely to offer greater insight and provide a guide to action because it is drawn from the data provided (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), which connects to my hope to provide a greater voice to the participants involved in the study. With each participant interview, there was an opportunity to construct theory that might lead to greater action in challenging internalized racism and moving towards a process of liberation. As stated earlier, this allowed me to test emergent understandings and refine the interview questions for each interview participant.

During the interviews, I began an informal analysis of the interviews while transcribing, then began open coding for salient categories, themes and patterns (Coffey, 1996) and my thoughts were rigorously recorded in a research journal. Once I defined an initial twenty-five categories drawn from interview transcripts, I coded all of the data according to those themes using a qualitative analysis software program called HyperResearch to assist with creating an efficient coding process. After the initial coding, I organized established categories in reference to the research question and three supporting questions. Once organized, I reviewed the data again to discover smaller categories and themes within the codes to see how to best represent the data collected. For example, within the code for participants' definition of liberation, I clustered all examples or ways that participants described their definition of liberation and found that there were two that were most named by the sample of participants. Those themes are presented in Chapter five. Additionally, during my analysis of the data, I referred several times to the literature summarized in the literature review to note the connections between my observations and the established theories about internalized racism and liberation. I reflected on the ways that the data coincided with and contradicted the conclusions of theorists and what new knowledge might be introduced.

In his explanation of data analysis for in-depth interviewing, Seidman (2006) describes two specific forms of reporting the data collected—crafting written profiles of the participants and making and analyzing thematic connections. I have done both for this study. The next chapter features profiles of each of the participants and makes linkages to their life histories and experiences with internalized racism and liberation and the following one analyzes the themes that surfaced from the data collected.

### Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness is often contested in qualitative research (Shenton, 2004) requiring frameworks and researcher rigor to create suitable credibility for the research that is conducted. In an article exploring strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research projects, Shenton (2004) reviews strategies for conducting a trustworthy study: credibility, which refers the ability of the research process to “promote confidence” in the phenomena being studied; transferability, which refers to the potentiality of the findings for one study being applied to other situations; dependability, which refers to the ability of the study to be replicated; and confirmability, which refers to the steps that are taken to ensure that the study’s results are the outcomes of ideas from participants rather than solely those of the researcher (Shenton, 2004).

In order to address the issue of credibility with the study, I undertook several of the suggestions provided by the author including, the selection of the well established qualitative research method (in-depth phenomenological interviewing) and an early familiarity with the culture being researched. Additionally, the three interview process of in-depth phenomenological interviewing offered a strategy that would ensure honesty in the informants as I could return to stories told in early interviews to accomplish iterative questioning. Lastly, my continued evaluation of the project as it developed provided an opportunity for continued “reflective commentary” (p.68) as I recorded impressions after each interview, during coding sessions, and as themes developed.

Findings of a small qualitative study are particular to the participants being study, therefore it is difficult to demonstrate that the findings are transferrable. Shenton (2004)

says, “it is also important that sufficient thick description of the phenomenon under investigation is provided to allow readers to have a proper understanding of it, thereby enabling them to compare the instances of the phenomenon described in the research report with those that they have seen emerge in their situations (p.70). To accomplish this, I provide both a profile analysis of the participants’ experience as well as a thematic exploration of both internalized racism and liberation. To accomplish trustworthiness in the study through dependability, clarifying each step of the research methodology and process, including the research design and implementation, detail of the data gathering, and assessment of the overall project is an attempt to provide a future researcher instruction on repeating the work.

To address the issue of confirmability, as a researcher who potentially shares similar racial experiences with the participants, I recognized that I possessed a position of power in the research process. I have a position of power because I have experienced internalized racism and as the researcher reporting the data, I had the power to overlay my own story over that of my participants. Realizing this, I chose to include my own voice in the research. In an attempt to stay away from the risk of “contaminating” others’ stories, I thought including my own voice would lessen that possibility. By using a reflexive method of in-depth interviewing, I sought to close the illusion of the researcher’s lack of connection between who and what is being researched (Etherington, 2004) and instead worked to be transparent in my process as a researcher closely connected to the data (Auerbach & Silverstein, 2003).

Additionally, the three-interview structure incorporates features that enhance the accomplishment of validity. It places participants’ comments in context. It encourages

interview participants over the course of 1 to 3 weeks to account for idiosyncratic days and to check for the internal consistency of what they say (Seidman, 2006). Furthermore, the in-depth interviewing methodology has a level of validity built in as a result of the context that is provided during the interviews. The longevity and thoroughness of the method furthers that validity. Seidman continues his thoughts about the validity and reliability of the interviewing process by stating,

[The] structure of the three interviews, the passage of time over which the interviews occur, the internal consistency and possible external consistency of the passages, the syntax, diction, and even nonverbal aspects of the passage, and the discovery and sense of learning that I get from reading the passage lead me to have confidence in its authenticity. (p. 26)

Lastly, my gender, social class, ethnicity, race, and sexual orientation influenced my relationship to this topic and to the participants. Some of the participants spoke of feeling more comfortable talking to a Black woman and said that if I had been White they might not have participated in the study. That I identified with much of what was discussed concerning race allowed our conversations to offer more transparency and honesty between me and the participants. Additionally though, I do recognize that my familiarity might have also interrupted the thoroughness of the interviews—though I do believe that I did allow for participants to share openly and reflectively.

### Limitations

This study is limited to exploring a small group of self-identified African American/Black women; therefore, the generalizability is impacted by the size of the sample that is constrained by the time-consuming nature of in-depth interviewing. While the group might represent a variety of ages, socioeconomic classes, sexual orientations,

and abilities, they do not represent all African American/Black women in the United States. The perspectives represented are a reflection of the 11 participants in the research study. Generalizability is also affected by the limitation of the geographic area where the study was conducted. All but one of the participants live and work on the East Coast of the United States. There is a clear geographic skew to the study. The findings may or may not be generalizable to the African American/Black male perspective on internalized racism and process to liberation, as a male perspective was outside the scope of this study.

An additional parameter that can be noted is the limited range of socioeconomic classes represented in the study. A majority of the participants currently identify themselves as members of a middle-class continuum. Though some of the participants spoke of growing up poor or working-class, 10 of the 11 now see themselves as some version of the middle-class and, therefore, may present a skewed perspective of a process of liberation from internalized racism. Connected to socioeconomic class, it also must be noted that all participants have completed four year college degrees, 10 of the 11 have completed masters' degrees, and 7 of the 11 are in the process of or have completed doctoral degrees. The sample that is included in this study are "well-educated" and high achieving, which also might skew the data collected.

Though discussed earlier, I feel it is important to note that my own subjectivity and bias based on my own experience as a Black woman who has experienced internalized racism creates an inevitable filter through which I collected and analyzed the data.



## CHAPTER 4

### FINDINGS

#### Introduction

The following profiles add context and coherence to the participants' experiences with internalized racism and liberation that will be shared in a thematic analysis chapter that follows. The participant profiles allow for some individuation of the participants (Seidman, 2006). The first chapter of the data analysis, the profile synopses, is an attempt to capture the participants' backgrounds, life experiences, and process of liberation as individuals. The participant profile synopses summarize the participants' experience with racism and internalized racism, development of a consciousness about their internalized racism, and experience with liberation. This form of presenting the results of my data collection allows the participants' stories to speak for themselves, before the participants are grouped together as a sample in the following analytic chapter. The benefit to having short narrative profiles is that it allows the researcher and the reader to notice the places where participants' stories overlap and where they are different.

The synopses provide a range of the perspectives that were included in the study. For example, all of the women identified themselves as African American or Black, but all did not have the ancestry of enslaved Africans that is often associated with the African American ethnic identity in the U.S. Additionally, participants' upbringing, schooling, and experiences with racism will be noted because all might have an impact on the way meaning was made of their internalized racism and process of a liberatory consciousness.

## Overview of the Complete Sample

All participants identify as Black women, and the majority of the sample (10 of the 11) has African American ancestry. When thinking of the research question, “What is it like to be an African American/Black woman in a process of liberation from internalized racism?” the participants’ stories are very similar—ways that internalized racism has affected them, the racism they have faced, the places they (we) have struggled and continue to struggle—and yet they are also different. Some identify as gay, some as straight. Some were raised in predominately communities of color, some in predominately White communities. Some grew up in different decades than others, and having a perception of those differences offers a way to understand the participants’ more clearly. Before exploring the individual profile synopses, I want to name some notable identity attributes that I noticed about the overall sample.

### Background/Upbringing

A majority of the sample spoke about growing up in racially affirming households or in neighborhoods where there were other Black people (Glenda, Denise, Paula, Tabitha, Earlene, Lauren, Nicole) or that their African American/Black extended family lived near (Lauren, Denise, Nicole, Tabitha, Marisa, Nicole). That, somewhat surprisingly, did not stop the majority of those participants from experiencing or developing internalized racism. Some of the sample (Liza, Debra, Paula, Stephanie, Liza) grew up in majority White settings/neighborhoods or experienced schooling that was racially mixed or predominately White (Debra, Liza, Tabitha, Stephanie, Earlene, Marisa, Lauren, Nicole, Glenda) and had some experience with racism in their schooling that may

or may not have had an impact on their experience of internalized racism. Because the study was not designed to understand the impact of their upbringing or schooling on their experience of internalized racism, my mention of this is mostly to provide a greater context for participants' understanding of internalized racism.

### Intersection with Other Identities

I think it is important to note that the racial identity of the participants intersects with other social identities (Adams, et. al, 2007) and depending on the identity, those intersections potentially adjusts their experience of internalized racism and liberation. First, it feels important to state that the majority of the sample has achieved at least one academic degree beyond a four-year bachelor's degree and all have graduated from college. Two of the participants' highest degree earned is a bachelor's, four participants have completed master's degrees, and five of the participants have completed doctoral degrees. This potentially skews the findings towards a very specific group of African American/Black women in the United States.

At least one participant, Stephanie, noted that her sexual orientation impacted her movement along a liberation journey. Therefore, it is important to note the participants' sexual orientation. Several of the participants identified themselves as queer, bisexual, lesbian, or identified themselves as being in a relationship with a woman. Four of the participants identified themselves as heterosexual. This again, might skew the sample—though there are no clear statistics about the number of queer/lesbian African American/Black women in the US, this may not be a representative sample of the African American/Black female experience in the US because of the relatively high number of

highly educated and queer identified participants represented. Additionally, if paying attention to class, it again is a skewed sample because most of the sample (10 of the 11) self identify as being currently middle-class, though they may have been raised in a lower class.

### Outline of the Summarized Profiles

Each profile starts with an epigraph quote taken from the interviews with the participants. The epigraph meant to provide a glimpse into the participant's experience or thinking about internalized racism prior to their raised consciousness of internalized racism. Following each synopsis, another quotation is provided to summarize their thinking from a liberatory perspective or observation about their process of liberation. One participant, Denise, did not talk about movement in her process; therefore, the absence of a quote at the end of her synopsis is to symbolize that lack of movement.

Each profile gives a summary the participant—insight into her background/upbringing, her experience with internalized racism, and ways that she is living and thinking about liberatory aspects of her life now that she has more awareness of her internalized racism. In the profile synopses, the age and physical description, including hair texture and skin tone (as noted by the researcher) is provided for each of the participants. Some of the participants, who range in age from 25 to 65 at the time of the interviews, state that their ages have an impact on they way they experienced racism in their lives. For example, the youngest participant had a different, less overt experience of racism in her schooling than the oldest participant and that is reflected in the length of the profiles provided. Additionally, I felt the need to pay close attention to their skin tone

and state their appearance in the profiles because their skin tone and hair texture might have had an impact on the way that they experienced internalized racism because of the colorism that exists in communities of color (hooks, 1995). Additionally, recognizing that internalized racism can manifest in physical ways (hooks, 1995, 2003; Leary, 2005; Lipsky, 1998), having this information may provide more context for the sample's experiences with internalized racism and liberation. Lastly, the number that is provided in parentheses after a participant quote is the interview number, either the first, second or third interview, in which that quote was shared.

### The Profiles

#### Debra

[The affect of IR on her life] It's affected everything—the way you walk, the way you talk, the way you look, the way you listen. Are you really saying I'm intelligent or are you saying, "You're intelligent for a Black person?" Are you really saying, "Wow, that's a good way to look at it, I would have never looked at it, but I guess because your Black perspective brings another" or "Your smart perspective brings another way into it." (Debra 1)

Debra, at 25 years old, is the youngest participant in the study. She is a dark brown skinned woman with locks that reach the middle of her back and with what she described as "nigga features." Her mother and grandmother raised her and they currently live in a predominately White, small town in the Northeast US with what she describes as "a few sprinkles of people of color." Though she was in an "underserved community," she considered her upbringing to be racially affirming, with her grandmother always providing children's books about Black main characters and historical figures. Debra believes that the insight and nurturing from her grandmother and mother, both of whom she described as "very strong Black women," paved the way for her to be successful. She

remembers being taught early that as a Black young woman that “you have to be 20 times better than your White counterpart just to be considered equal.” Debra remembers feeling “ugly” because she didn’t see anyone that looked like her and felt like she was always expected to speak for all Black people because of the lack of diversity in her grade school classrooms. She was recruited to play basketball and specifically chose a college in New York to attend because the college had more diversity. While in college Debra was again asked to represent viewpoints as a person of color and dealt with racialized conflict on campus but felt she had a community to support her and to connect to. Currently, Debra works in the health field in the area where she grew up and believes that many of her White clients don’t expect her to have the level of education that she has and is constantly hearing people commenting on how “articulate” she is. This history and current experience has caused her to constantly question herself, and she thinks often about the way people perceive her as a Black woman. She believes that the racism she faces places her in a state of “hyper-alert” and realizes that state is “sometimes more hurtful than helpful.”

Debra said she has learned to see the racial game as a game of chess—in order to survive she sees herself as a pawn. But she says she has learned to play the game and has learned because of racism, there are certain things she’s “gotta do in order to get by.” She described internalized racism as something that is “oppressing (her) spirit” and believes that there is no area of her life that it has not touched. Debra named that some of the ways that internalized racism manifests in her life include decisions about who she is attracted to and her inability to show emotion and feels that the latter was learned and generationally passed down.

Debra felt like she had moments of liberation, which she defined as “self-actualization,” but didn’t feel like someone her age would be able to reach full self-actualization because she believes that age and life experience would impact the “continual process.” She felt like liberation might manifest as “someone having their own style about themselves or someone having their own vibe about them,” or someone who might have an “I don’t care type of attitude about them.” She named celebrities, like Bob Marley, Kanye West, and Dave Chapelle, as examples of people who might embody liberation because they defied the odds and perceptions of others. She also named the qualities of “peacefulness,” the ability to keep pushing and challenging racism, and not accepting the oppression as examples of liberatory consciousness or thinking.

But my liberation is understanding where you are and being able to maintain and continue to push. You know, I mean not push in a negative light, but continue to successfully push yourself. (Debra 3)

### Denise

I probably wear the mask more at work than I do in church, in my sorority, in other environments where, and I guess, [and] I'm making this observation now, where everybody looks like me. Work is where my world is most diverse. So, if I were to list my friends for you, I don't have a White friend... I don't have that. I don't have that with any other race, and so, and I don't know why. I don't know if it's comfort zone? (Denise 1)

Denise, 43, currently resides in the northeastern city where she was born and raised. As a light brown skinned child with finely textured hair, she enjoyed a tight-knit family and African American community during her upbringing. She attended school in her neighborhood and was surrounded from kindergarten until 12<sup>th</sup> grade by African American faces, except for the Santiagos, the only Latino family in the neighborhood. She remembers the race affirming warmth of both her extended family and her

neighborhood, often hanging out with other neighborhood kids, playing double-dutch and cards or spending time at her grandparents' house with her stair-stepper cousins on the weekends.

Now working at the prominent Ivy League institution in the city doing diversity and inclusion work, Denise remembers that the institution and community around the institution were a part of the communities her family did not venture into when she was younger. She remembers being told by her mother that those were the communities “where the White people lived,” and though not told to stay away, she knew at a young age “that they [the White people] were over there and we're over here.” She noted the separation, but didn't feel clear on what it meant for Whites and Blacks to be separate. She says she's still “struggling with what that means even today.”

Denise continued her predominately Black schooling experience by going to a historically Black college in Virginia in 1983 and felt that racism was much more prevalent during that time in her life. She remembers moving to campus and again feeling the support of the all Black community but experiencing the racism of the South in town when she left campus. Being from the northeast, she recognized that she had a different experience from her roommate who would share stories about growing up Black in the South. Denise said her roommate talked about “[knowing] her place.” Denise was clear that as a Black person, she “didn't have a place. Every place is [her] place and [her] space and your space” and did not feel limited by race at all.

Interviews with Denise were filled with stories of race and a clear knowledge about racism, but very little surfaced about her experience of internalized racism because she didn't feel like she wrestled much with the phenomenon. She defined internalized



racism as Black on Black discrimination, which is one of the agreed upon manifestation, though speaks to her limited understanding and exploration of the concept. On her participant questionnaire, she marked only one manifestation of internalized racism having to do with appearance, and when discussed, she said she marked that in reference to being a lighter-skinned Black woman with longer hair that people always commented on.

She discussed feeling like she wore “a mask” (referencing the Paul Dunbar poem, “The Mask”) at work around her White colleagues at work and felt that it was definitely because of race and trying to protect herself as a Black woman in a predominately White work setting. She feels she copes with the racism that she faces at work and in the larger world, but doesn’t feel like she has internalized that racism in detrimental ways, and therefore, doesn’t feel like she has really had a process of liberation because she grew up sheltered from the “pain” of racism. She associated and felt part of an oppressed group as a Black person but said she didn’t “feel oppressed” and thought that she always “had liberation,” though was clear that she chose not to bring her whole self to work.

#### Earlene

I saw something in the store, I really liked it, and I said, "Mommy, let's go get that," and she said, "We're not going to that store. They won't let us try on clothes." And I was like, "Why not?" And she said it was because we're Black. And I was like, “Wow.” (Earlene 1)

Growing up in her small Louisville, KY community, Earlene’s well established, blue collar, hard working parents attempted to challenge the racism that she and her siblings faced everyday with race affirming actions—getting books about Black people and speaking positively about African Americans. But Earlene says, “They couldn’t beat

all those other messages” coming to her from the racist South. Earlene, now a 62 year-old, tall, dark skinned African American woman with low-cut, graying but mostly black natural hair, spoke about her childhood and upbringing with a remembrance of the good and the painful. Currently still living in the South, she remembers attending a segregated school until 6<sup>th</sup> grade and experiencing the affirming support of some of her teachers but also endured the sneers of some of her fellow Black classmates, church and neighborhood friends because of her dark skin. Even after experiencing harmful words and perceptions of the segregated school, she still felt there was a “shock to [her] system” when she and other Black classmates enrolled in an integrated junior high school. She remembers the continued name calling and made a conscious decision in middle school that “she might be ugly, but she would be smart.”

Having faced racism throughout her junior high, high school, and college education, Earlene felt like she has had many experiences with racism in her life and those experiences, even those received secondhand from watching her parents deal with the assaults of racism, affected her psychologically. She feels like she carried around a lot of anger. But Earlene also believes that she internalized a lot of the racism, and defined internalized racism as “basically tak[ing] the oppressive and racist thoughts of the dominant White culture and believ[ing] them and [having them] become a part of your psyche.” Some of the examples that Earlene names as her own manifestations of internalized racism include her own negative perceptions about her appearance regarding her relationships with other lighter skinned Black people, being embarrassed about being linked to another Black woman who “made all Black people look bad” at a campus where she was teaching, and the ways in which she over-prepared when she first started

teaching at a predominately White college. Surprisingly, she also felt that internalized racism had affected her in both positive and negative ways. She cited the fact that her profession as a professor was connected to that early decision to be smart, despite thinking she was ugly. Additionally, though, the negative impact of internalized racism on her self-esteem and self-worth impacted all parts of her life—her perceptions of her self, what she wore, choices she made about her appearance, her perceptions of others, and relationships with others.

When asked about her understanding of a process of challenging and letting go of internalized racism, she was clear to state that she doesn't use the term liberation, but instead says that she "knows who she is" and talks about the terms "self-actualization" "self-definition" and the process she's been on. Additionally, she believes that as a Black person she has had to work very hard at self-defining and describes her experiences toward her self-definition in her Black identity as a "long evolutionary process" that she has been developing since college in a variety of ways.

In the midst of our three interviews, Earlene experienced a situation that she named as a current manifestation of her internalized racism. She said she quickly interrupted the thought with self-talk, denying the power of the stereotype that had risen in her thoughts, but it was a clear message to her the power of the oppressive racist system has on her everyday thinking. This experience confirmed for her that she didn't believe that individuals living with internalized racism, herself included, would ever be completely "clear" of internalized racism. That experience encouraged her to reflect on her process toward liberation from internalized racism. She believed that 40 years ago she would have never noticed the thought, 25 years ago she would have realized it, but only

after about two weeks had gone by. Earlene said that noticing the thought in the moment is a newer thing in her process of liberation from internalized racism.

She didn't feel like there would ever be a point in which she could say that she had reached liberation or complete self-definition, if a singular place even exists. Because of the many racist messages that she has to face on a daily basis, she feels like she has to be in a constant fight to refute them and be diligent. She continued - reflecting on her own process of learning to like her skin tone, features and hair - her appreciation of her appearance took work, reflection, and that it took years and she wants it to continue. "It's an experience of becoming. That's what I would say. You know, of not quite having arrived, but staying on the journey" (Earlene 3).

#### Glenda

I didn't like being Black—it was too hard. It was too hard hearing all of that negativity, seeing all of the work that folks had to do, seeing how my parents had to struggle when other people, you know, weren't. And some of it was about bad choices. There's no question about that. Hearing about scientific studies that Blacks are intellectually inferior. I grew up with that shit, you know, and it's like – so I didn't like being Black. And who would? Who would, when the messages that you're getting were constantly negative? And the sad thing to me is that all of those positive messages that I was getting did not have the strength to combat the negative ones. And so I finally checked out of Blackness in some way. I mean it really created a split personality. (Glenda 1)

Glenda, 56, a small, brown skinned woman with short natural hair, is currently a minister serving a congregation in the Northeast. Having grown up in a Midwest city, Glenda remembers growing up in a middle- to working-class, all African American neighborhood with her parents, who owned their home and attended an African Methodist Episcopal Zion church that was steeped in Black history. She remembers having parents who were well read and taught her Black history from an early age in

order to combat “this evil called racism that could devour [her]” and they wanted to give her and her brother “some kind of internalized strength to combat the external evil.” As a model for the kind of strength and resistance she wanted to have to racism, Glenda fondly remembered her mother telling her a story that has stayed with her through her life. Her mother, while in her twenties, went to a segregated lunch counter and watched White people coming up to the counter and being served, while no one paid attention to her. After some time she said, “Look, I’ve been here for 20 minutes. All these people came in after me, got menus, I’d like a menu.” The response that she received was, “We don’t serve niggers here,” and she quickly retorted, “I don’t eat them either, now I’d like to see a menu.”

Glenda faced a different kind of racism, though. When her parents separated because of her father’s alcoholism when she was eight, she went to live in Philadelphia where she faced being the only Black child in a gifted class of 44 White students after being previously schooled in predominately Black classrooms in the Midwest. She heard things like, “Oh, you’re our Hershey Kiss,” and kids wanted to touch her hair as she felt on display in a different way that she hadn’t been before. She also felt that she began getting mixed messages about the value of Blackness at home. For ten years, she felt steeped in Blackness with experiences at a Black church, school, and in a Black family, and now, she was being told that she couldn’t get a good education at the Black school down the street and must attend predominately White schools. This continued through high school and the college she attended only had 50-100 Black students out of a class of 2,000. By this time in her life, she saw herself as different from other Black people and found herself developing a pattern of overcompensating and trying to singly prove that

Black people were not all of the things that the stereotypes said that they were. Glenda had a tenuous relationship with other Black students in college and throughout seminary, as she wanted to be seen as different from other Blacks.

When asked about her definition of internalized racism, she talked about the self-loathing and hating Blackness that she felt like she developed within. She talked about internalizing the negative messages about Black people, which caused her to loathe herself, as she didn't want to be what those messages were.

Glenda cited a visit to African American family friends after college and a depressive episode in seminary as meaningful points during her process toward a liberatory consciousness. Visiting family friends, Dean and Shelia in California, reeducated her with the profound power of Blackness and showed her the dignity of what it means to be Black. Through that visit with them, she felt like she didn't have to be ashamed of being Black because she learned that Black people were always people of great worth and dignity, and Dean and Shelia encouraged her not to believe all the lies she had been taught. Additionally, after working to overcompensate for the stereotypes about Blacks, Glenda found herself unable to uphold her image of 4.0 super-student in seminary, and it caused a depressive episode where she sought help for the drinking habit that she had developed and breakdown she was suffering. After seeking therapy with an African American therapist, taking medication, and finding a number of supportive mentors, specifically a Black field supervisor for her seminary internship and a White couple who taught about racism dynamics, by the time seminary ended she felt much more secure in her Blackness in the midst of the predominately White congregation that she ended up leading after graduating from seminary.

Like other participants, Glenda faced an event in the time during our series of interviews where she questioned what part of her reaction to the event was based in her internalized racism. As a minister, Glenda was invited to the installation services for another Black minister in her denomination in a predominately Black church. At the installation service, Glenda found herself impatient with the length of the service and the attempt of the church to make money off of the services by offering DVDs of the event and questioned what part of her discomfort was about liturgical appropriateness and what part was about her own internalized racism and perceptions of Blackness.

Glenda continues to struggle in her liberatory journey, remembering the model of her mother's quick response in the face of racism during segregation. When faced with more covert racism by the predominately White staff at her current congregation, Glenda finds herself sometimes still wanting to be the good Black person and not cause waves, though she feels much more secure in her Blackness. Now, married to a White woman, she realizes that she will have to "negotiate this stuff for life" meaning race, internalized racism and her process of developing a liberatory consciousness, but she is clear that she will always struggle moving toward liberation. Her main struggle continues to be the fight against overcompensation against the stereotypes of Blacks being lazy, and she often finds herself continuing to practice the internalized racist pattern of overworking, though she continues to work on that as well, gaining insight from author/poet Audre Lorde.

I have this saying on my bulletin board from Audre Lorde, which I don't look at nearly enough – I ought to look at it every day—every day it should be my mantra, like the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm. You know, self-preservation is not self-care. It's an act of warfare in a world that really doesn't want me to exist. I'm doing a very bad job of quoting Sister Audre, but the reality is that it's not optional. And I do

think that's critical to recognize that that's the sorta mantra towards liberation.  
(Glenda 3)

#### Lauren

This is part of the reason I became a medical sociologist, because I remember as a child, my mom has hypertension and my grandmother has type 2 diabetes and we would have to go, probably, 10 to 15 miles to the other side of town, to the grocery store for stuff that was specific for their diet. I remember us having to make an effort to go to this other part of town to get low sodium things for my mom and then sugar free stuff for my grandma. And, I remember from early on in those experiences, thinking there's something that's different about these people on this side of town that's something that makes them more special. And the thing that I thought made them special was that they were White. And so, when I was in elementary school, I was like, I don't think I thought, ok, I'm gonna become White, because I didn't think I could do that. But, I think I... I really didn't like being African American.... I think I just didn't like what I felt like we weren't getting in our neighborhoods. (Lauren 1)

Lauren, 33, a two time cancer survivor and dark skinned woman with two strand twisted natural hair, is a recent Ph.D. graduate who currently resides in a Northeastern city working as a post-doc doing research at a local hospital. Though she has lived in about five states resulting from advanced schooling and work opportunities, Lauren grew up working-class with her extended family near, in an all Black neighborhood in the Southern United States. Her parents, an auto mechanic and a stay at home mom, also grew up in the neighborhood and saw Lauren attend the same school that they attended as children, though by the time Lauren attended, the school's teaching staff had transformed racially. Though her elementary had a "99%" African American student population, Lauren remembers that 85% of the teachers were from other races, most of them being White. For junior high and high school, the schools were integrated magnet schools and because she excelled academically, Lauren was tracked into classrooms where she was often one of two African Americans in a classroom of mostly White students. This



combined with other factors, like the example from the quote above where her family members had to travel to a White neighborhood in order to get food to suit their medical needs, and White teachers giving her messages that she was different, Lauren worked to rid herself of her southern accent and be more like the White people around her. She befriended the “preppy White kids from the good side of town” and felt separate from and ostracized by most the other African American students she attended school with. That lack of connection continued through college with Lauren citing a particularly difficult moment where a member of the African American student group publicly challenged Lauren’s involvement with other cultural groups and her choice not to closely associate with the African American cultural group. This lack of connection to African Americans and experience with wanting to be like or accepted by Whites contributed to Lauren’s low sense of self-worth through school, and though she is working to challenge those beliefs now, she feels she still struggles.

Previously believing that internalized racism was limited to disliking your physical features and working to change them “like Michael Jackson—like the whole face bleaching and nose changing and stuff,” Lauren has broadened her definition in more recent years. She has complicated her definition of internalized racism in recent years to include things like, “how you feel about yourself,” “how much you value yourself and your experience” and recognizing the ways that she “puts up with things [she] shouldn’t put up with” or overworks to compensate for the stereotypes that she believes others have about African Americans being incompetent. When teaching as a graduate student, Lauren found herself over-preparing for her classes to prove that she wasn’t “some affirmative action person” and to be ready for the challenges that White

students would give her as a Black female college instructor. At the time she noticed the White male colleague that shared an office with her didn't care if the students liked him or not and that he had a level of confidence and entitlement that she noticed she didn't possess. She now sees her overcompensation and attempts to prove her worth connected to internalized racism.

Lauren believes that the development of her definition of internalized racism is a result of friends who question and challenge her and get her to think more complexly about race. She believes her process of liberation will lead to feeling better about herself—about the ways she looks in addition to other examples, like being able to talk or share her perspective about racist incidents without guilt or feeling she can stand up for herself. She finds herself now being more comfortable in “being [herself] in places where [she] didn't think it was okay” before, like the classroom. Lauren recognizes that she's in a process of liberation and can see the ways that she's growing and challenging her internalized racism but names herself as a “backslider” in moments when she goes back to deferring to other people not trusting her own voice. Despite her movement in her process and understanding of liberation, she says that she doesn't want to be “completely liberated” because she doesn't want to lose sight of racism. She believes that she is currently looking for models and connection with others that she feels are a little further along the process and has come to learn that “there isn't just one way to be a Black person.”

The end point is imaginary, you know, that it's—there's always a process, because you're not shut off from everybody else, and you shouldn't be... But I guess understanding it racially is, I guess, understanding, one, that there's more than one kind of Black people, and there's no end point because I think you can always become another one of those persons. And that's it's not worth the effort to punish myself for what I might've done or said to somebody that I didn't—or

that I can't undo. Or even if I tried to, it just doesn't really matter because it's not gonna—I'm not in that moment anymore. (Lauren 3)

### Liza

And I'm an only child and I think at that point I began to close in on myself, in that—well, first, if someone could hate me because of the color of my skin, then there's something must be wrong with me. I never turned it outward that the problem was coming from the outside, it was something wrong with me and, I think at that point I began to have what some would call a troubled childhood...So it's why I hate my hair. I hate my eye color. I hate my skin color. I hate the shape of my nose. I hate my lips. (Liza 1)

Liza is a 49-year-old, light brown skinned professor at a school in the Northeast. Her fine, wavy hair and light eyes offer testament to the blend of her mother's dark brown skin and her Black father's ability to pass for White with light skin and blue eyes. Liza remembers her parents being "pretty silent about race." She grew up and lived on the west coast with her parents until she was seven and remembers that as a time where she felt "most alive." She remembers it as the place before race impacted her life so intensely and before her father chose to move the family back to the east coast city in search of better job opportunities. Before moving east, Liza says she never knew that race had any significance, but after her move, that all changed. Liza learned about race on the playground at age 8 when a boy called her colored "with spite in his voice." At age 10 her parents moved from a Black neighborhood to a more affluent White neighborhood, and Liza went through the common experience of being told that the neighborhood White children couldn't play with her because of the color of her skin. As a result of that and other experiences with racism, she felt like a part of her "just shutdown," and she stopped looking in mirrors. During our interviews, Liza recalled a time when she was 9 years old saving her allowance to buy a long, straight wig and that she felt elated to get it. After

having it for a bit, a neighbor made a negative comment about it, and she never wore it outside the house again but remembers wearing it inside the house when she wanted to feel good. With the wig on, she would look in the mirror; other times she wouldn't look because "[she] didn't want to see what [she] saw." Liza felt as a young person that she was constantly trying to compensate for "the problem being her."

Liza attended an Ivy League institution in the Northeast and felt that was the first time she was really aware of what the racial categories were and "how impermeable they were." Her experience with racism continued as well as her feelings of internalized racism. In college, during the time of affirmative action backlash, Liza was told by her White professors that she had no business being there, and she didn't have the internal strength to fight those messages and still thought the problem was her. Though Liza didn't feel like she had a positive Black identity when she went to college, she did have her "first cohort of multi-racial friendships with Black, Native American, and Chicano kids" and remembers going to the "Third World Center" at her university. After college, Liza says race went on the back burner. She always wanted to be an artist and writer but went to grad school for geology because she thought if she chose a field that was more respectable that she would be more respectable. Race was not something that she wanted to consciously think about in graduate school and became more of a free spirit, but like other participants, she found herself overcompensating, studying extra hard to prove to others she was worthy and for their superficial approval.

Liza doesn't feel that she really started having an awareness of internalized racism until she was almost 30 years old and still wrestles with the ways that it manifests for her. At one point in the interview, Liza acknowledged that she has been teaching for 18 years

and struggles to read her teaching evaluations because she fears the criticism from even just one student. Her fear keeps her from being connected to Black students on her campus. She believes that they would know that she has far less to offer than other Black faculty and staff. When Liza spoke about the definition of internalized racism, she described it very personally as believing what people say about her—belief in the stereotypes, belief in the inadequacy, belief in the Sambo stereotype, the drapetomania—that it might not apply to all Blacks, but applies to her “in spades”, or with abundance.

All of the negative experiences involving racism went in, and Liza says they’re still there though she realizes that she’s further along a path of liberation than she was 5 years ago. Liza defined liberation as realizing that one’s self-worth is not based on any stereotype and not based on hatred of the self. She feels like she started on her path by having an “unspoken and undefined hunger that she wanted to write.” Ten years ago, Liza signed up for a writing retreat and felt accepted by the other writers present, and this experience was “a significant part of [her] liberation journey.”

Liza shares her story of race more publically now in her essay writing. She says she still has the voices of internalized racism that come up and ridicule her process and believes that they will always be there. In her process of liberation, she is trying to figure out a way to let the voices exist and see them as a survival mechanism but begin to hold them more compassionately and realize that the negative voices are not needed anymore. She wants to get to a place of understanding that she has just as much to offer as anyone else and that she is just as valuable as anyone else.

In her process of liberation, she feels she is more compassionate, that she forces herself to look in the mirror and “establish a friendlier relationship to [herself]” and finds

herself being more deliberate and attentive to seeking a balance. Liza feels that liberation is important because otherwise she feels she is a partial human being. Part of her liberation is “renewing or reclaiming that part that was seemingly missing.”

[About the importance of liberation] I don't know, it seems to me that to be alive this is a gift and that I have a responsibility to live that gift as fully as possible and as fully as possible has not what I've been doing. I mean from the outside it may look like, “Oh, you know, faculty at a great college,” but not when I hate myself. I think in a way...I think it's a horrible tragedy to hate the gift. And if it's possible to turn that perception, well, it's more than perception, turn that self-definition around—there really is a responsibility to do it. (Liza 3)

### Marisa

I kinda felt like I bought into the idea that I was an exceptional Black – I was different than the other Black people. I think I probably was, I was queer and kinda freaky, you know? But I think because nobody Black was there with me, that it became a thing of like well, Black people are like that, and I want to be more free and open and like [White people] Do you know what I mean?...So it was the fear of, or the disdain for what I felt like this closed conservative definition of Blackness that excluded me, that made it feel like White people were more allies to me, particularly like alternative-minded White people...I think part of the internalized thing on the psychological level is really buying into the cultural notion in a big way that White people are good. (Marisa 1)

Marisa is a 39-year-old, dark skinned Black woman with shoulder length locks who was raised in the Mid-Atlantic by parents reared in the South. Both of Marisa's parents were teachers and sought better opportunity for their family and that search facilitated their move to the mostly White, middle class suburb of the northeastern city. Marisa remembers her parents being very race conscious, “clear about the South” and “clear about not liking White people very much,” as a result of their having grown up in the South. Though she lived in the mostly White suburb, she remembers growing up in a community of Black people—college friends of her parents and other extended family members lived in the same area, therefore, felt her upbringing was very race affirming.

Part of her upbringing also was centered in the importance of education and because of their reservations about the area public school system, Marisa was sent to a private, conservative Christian school for pre-school and elementary. Though the school was diverse, she remembers getting the implicit messages from the conservative, all White teaching staff that “White people are superior” and that “races shouldn’t mix.” Though receiving those messages, Marisa felt like as a younger person, she was “clear and comfortable to have a healthy Black identity” and remembers having Black friends in school. This continued in junior high when she attended a private Catholic school. She remembers having her “crew of Black friends” and her first Black teachers.

Marisa feels her “big shift” in terms of race happened for her in high school. During high school, Marisa attended a public school and because of her previous private schooling when she went to a public high school, she didn’t know anyone and she felt the beginning of a new narrative. She was tracked into the honors classes that were predominately White, and she found herself being outcast by other Black kids in school who taunted her with statements, such as, “You think you’re White.” Marisa said the “energy [from the other Black kids] was so negative” that it was clear that she would never be a part of the Black kids’ community at school. To combat her experience with other Black students, Marisa, who was also a dancer, said she got involved with the predominately White “freaky theatre crowd” and took on a “Why can’t we all be human beings, and why should race matter?” narrative. She got anchored in with the alternative White students and felt like she fit there because she felt like she could experience freedom there. Increasingly feeling positioned outside of the Black community, she believed what her White friends said about her being an “exceptional Black person” and

felt she was learning that White people could offer something Black people could not. Now, Marisa acknowledges that some of her struggles came from being the first in her family to be raised middle class, attend desegregated schools, and live in the suburbs, so her parents weren't really supportive or equipped with the tools to help her sort out the muddled identity that she was developing. Instead they wondered what was wrong with her and Marisa reasoned that White people could offer a perspective Black people could not and found herself devaluing Black people.

During college, her struggles continued. After bucking the family tradition by choosing to leave (after one semester) the historically Black college where she was enrolled, Marisa's difficult relationship with her parents continued until she decided to support herself. As a result of this, Marisa didn't feel like she belonged in her family and moved further north and enrolled in an "alternative" college that allowed students to extensively study other cultures around the world by traveling abroad. Marisa felt like the school continued to build on her comfort of being in an alternative White environment. Despite this, Marisa also felt like this was where she experienced an awakening because she was living in Latin American countries and "becoming radicalized" by learning about poverty, indigenous cultures, women's studies and racial and justice issues. That is when Marisa stopped straightening her hair and started moving toward a stronger person of color identity.

Marisa defined internalized racism as the valuation of White people—believing that on some level, White people are better. Marisa believes that she thought that White people were more enlightened, more open-minded, more educated, more spiritual than Black people when she was less conscious of her internalized racism. She feels that the



racism she experienced and the messages she received were more intricate and in order to move toward liberation, she has had to work to undo those ideas and messages. She said she's had to learn how to see the limitations placed on Black people and learn how to understand the privilege afforded to White people to be more expansive in their identities. Marisa is no longer terribly impressed with what she thought White people had and is realizing that some of the choices she made trying to be accepted by Whites were detrimental, hurtful, and deeply wounding to her.

Because of those wounds, Marisa understands liberation from internalized racism in a more “nationalist” kind of way, which can be described as having “a certain distance from White intimacies, a distance from Whiteness.” She feels that Whiteness has been “seductive” in the past and that she put it too much on a pedestal, and, therefore, it feels important to her to shift her thinking in terms of “affirming Black beauty, Black aesthetics, Black bodies—Black hair, Black features, and Black skin.” A process of liberation for Marisa has included finding a conscious kind of Black community, and she has learned to look more closely for models of Black freedom and Black spiritual liberation and believing that she could be both Black and Bohemian.

It also has been about having Black people at the center of her life. Marisa feels the landscape of her relationships have changed a lot and that change is connected to her undoing her internalized racism. She feels that her identity shifted while in a previous relationship with a White partner. Marisa felt like she had been burned by looking up to White people and feels like she came to realize that it wasn't a great idea to be in interracial relationships because she became conscious of all of the underlying feelings that were surfacing. From her experience, it doesn't feel as safe allowing White people to

be privy to the inner thoughts of Blackness and intimately. It means being partnered with a person of color. She currently partnered with an Afro-Caribbean man.

Marisa is “skeptical about the possibility of full liberation” because the amount of racism that is still directed at African Americans. She also believes the amount of profound disruption that happened during the Trans-Atlantic slave trade caused African Americans “to transform almost completely,” making a “full liberation” difficult to reach. Marisa sees liberation as a process that she is “smack in the middle of,” and though she’s not sure there’s an endpoint, feels like she’s trying to get to what she describes as “a feeling of being at ease.” She said the process is a constant struggle, feels lonely, and is “kinda crazy making,” but she’s clear that she can’t go back.

I’m in this path. I think of liberation. It’s like it makes me mad – it doesn’t make me feel like, “Oh, well, I’m not worthy.” I’m not at that anymore. It makes me realize like there’s something wrong with the world that would say that I’m not worthy, and that’s liberating... So it’s a constant struggle to stay on the path of liberation, I think. I don’t really have a choice. I can’t go back, you know. Like I’m not gonna cut my locks or straighten my hair. I’m not gonna hate myself. I’m not gonna—I’m not gonna go back to those places. (Marisa 3)

#### Nicole

I wanted to be White. Because, actually, before it was just not liking my features. But once it got to the point where I like wanted to be Karen’s daughter, that’s when I like really was just like “I wanna be White.” When she declined to take me in, then I knew it was because I was Black, so I wanted to be White even more. It was horrible. (Nicole 1)

Nicole, a 26 year-old, master’s student with fine, short, curly, black hair and medium brown skin, lives in the Northeast but was primarily raised in a predominately Black Southern city. Nicole’s family was very involved in the Civil Rights Movement, and there was a huge emphasis on education in her family. At age 5, a few years after her parents’ divorce, she and her mother moved to a predominately White area of the

Northeast in order for her mother to complete her undergraduate degree. They faced continual racism for the duration of the time that they were in this small area. Her mother faced the brunt of the racism, as Nicole was too young to register most of it. However, she did remember studying/traveling abroad with her mother to Africa and having people want to touch her hair. Once Nicole's mother completed her schooling, they moved to a small Georgia town where Nicole faced the often-heard story of being told by a White child that she could not play with Nicole because Nicole was Black.

For a year of her adolescent schooling, Nicole went to boarding school in Canada and once arriving there, that's when she "felt like racism really hit her in the face." Nicole recalled having a roommate at the boarding school that called her skin "poo colored," although the roommate herself was Bangladeshi and had brown skin. She would talk about Nicole's nose, lips, and hair, and Nicole began believing that she was "the ugliest thing on earth." Because of this, she began to hate being Black. Nicole feels she went to Canada feeling secure in her Blackness and came back "shattered" and angry from that experience at the boarding school.

Additionally, there was a White woman, Karen, on staff that befriended Nicole and provided affection in the absence of Nicole's mother. Nicole began to believe that the woman would love her more if she were White, so Nicole began sucking in her lips to make them thinner. Nicole had to leave the school because her family couldn't afford for her to continue, and Nicole began acting out toward her mother because Nicole believed that would assure that she would be sent back to the school and the White woman's affection. Nicole's behavior was so bad that Nicole's mother asked the woman if she would be willing to adopt Nicole for the school year and when Karen refused, that

deepened Nicole's belief that she was unwanted because she was Black. The self-loathing belief that she wanted to be White continued throughout high school as her schooling continued to be predominately White until she attended a historically Black women's college. Nicole feels like her college experience "corrected" her perceptions about herself and taught her to be a strong Black woman. Through courses and information provided to her about African Diasporic history and a pride that was a foundation of the college, Nicole felt stronger in her Black identity, more conscious of her internalized racism by the time she graduated.

Nicole defines internalized racism as believing on some level, whether it is conscious or unconscious, that she and/or other Black people are inferior to Whites in some way. As a result of her internalized racism, Nicole used to feel like her goal was to transcend Blackness but she started "hating it less." She believed once it wasn't a problem anymore. It wasn't something that she needed to overcome. Nicole says some of her manifestations of internalized racism existed in feelings like searching out White mother figures and thinking they would like her better if she were White and wanting to distinguish herself from other Black people.

Currently, she says she still struggles with internalized racism in her life today with her relationship with her White partner. Though they've been together 2 years, it is still difficult at times for Nicole to believe that her partner would be attracted to her. She feels like the standard of beauty in the US has really messed up her perceptions of herself and believes that it will take the rest of her life to feel good about herself. Nicole is clear that her internalized racism manifests more about her physicality because she has always felt confident about her intellect.

Nicole defines liberation as undoing all the messages that we've taken in about the value of Black people. For her, the college experience served as a major catalyst on this path. Other things like listening to conscious hip hop, gaining an awareness, understanding, and clarity about the way that racism works, and reading "liberation literature," such as Friere, has helped her along her path. She doesn't think she'll ever be done with her with her struggle with internalized racism but believes that she practices liberation now by continuing in therapy, having conversations with her partner about these issues, and reading more Black historical authors and learning about their stories.

Part of Nicole's liberatory process has included anger about all of the racist messages heaped on her and she believes liberation often manifests as being less apathetic or reactionary about racism and the feelings that come up because of it. Instead, it is the practice of having a critical eye on what happened, having consciousness about how it makes her feel but not always acting on the internalized racism that might come up because of it. Nicole says she feels a much more solid sense of self as she moves along her process of liberation—that she feels freer, more content as opposed to insecure or not there at all. Nicole acknowledged that the process has not been easy, but it has not been a dreadful process.

It feels cathartic. It feels much better than dealing with it on an unconscious level, because then you're just fucked up and acting it out in whatever way. It feels – it must feel less painful, it must. Because anything different – like in trying to like keep [internalized racism] in or like under wraps, or pretend like it's not there – that takes some effort. (Nicole 3)

Paula

So [a teacher at her college], around the same era—I don't remember what was happening, but people were apparently telling—I mean I don't remember the content, but it was some kind of racial racist joke that was being told. And I was

just with everybody else laughing. And she pulled me aside, and she said to me, “Why do you laugh at those jokes?” (Paula 1)

Paula is a 65-year-old woman with light brown skin and softly straightened hair that reaches her earlobes. She now teaches about race and racism at a college in the Northeast and has an intricate understanding of race and racism. Raised in the Bronx, New York by Caribbean parents, Paula has little memory of the first neighborhood that she and her parents lived in. Her father owned the apartment building where she lived and the tenants were “very diverse.” Paula did not consider her parents to be racially affirming, and she doesn’t remember being raised with the concept of race in her household. Her father was born in Trinidad and was biracial, and her mother’s family was from Grenada and Trinidad, therefore, she was raised to identify herself as West Indian. Paula said that her father could pass for White, and she believed he “had a lot of internalized racism stuff himself,” and she didn’t really believe that her mother had a race consciousness at all.

When she was 8, Paula and her family moved to another neighborhood in the Bronx that was White and working-class for better surroundings and schooling. She and her brother were the only Black children in their Catholic school, which she remembers as “a very, very prejudice and demeaning experience across the board.” Paula told the story of being at the top of her class at her previous school, an all Black, Catholic school in her previous neighborhood, then having her performance fall off when she attended this new school. A talkative child, Paula said she received a lot of reprimand from the nuns at the new school and was the only girl in her class that got spanked by the nuns. She was sure that was a result of racism.

For high school, Paula attended another predominately White school with a “few Black kids and bunch of Latino kids.” Though she considered herself “colored,” being the darkest person in her family, she “didn’t know that [she] was Black” and believes her positive identity with Blackness came much later. In high school she befriended mostly Latinos kids, and remembers not connecting with the other Black students. She didn’t feel she identified with them and didn’t want to. The teaching staff did not separate her from the other Black students, and therefore, were no less racist towards Paula. One incident resulting in a White teacher telling Paula “to be quiet and act like a White woman.”

Paula worked for a year before attending college and was befriended by “Aunt Ruth,” an African American woman who she saw as “a second mother” who lived in her neighborhood. Aunt Ruth and her husband helped Paula by their presence and intelligence as they “stood in juxtaposition to the things that the media and [her] family said about the American Negro.”

The Catholic college that Paula attended was completely White, with Paula being the only student of color in the entire college. She remembers college being hard as she began to get more of a sense of her own racial identity. Paula remembers that the nuns in college continued their racism towards her and these experiences and other experiences with racism “helped enlighten her and reminded her that she was Black.” She didn’t consistently see herself as Black or colored, but was being reminded of it because of these racist events and Paula internalized those moments as “something being wrong with her because [she was] colored.” She now acknowledges that “no one was helping her fend off” or understand the racism that was coming at her.

After college, Paula got a teaching job and was the only Black teacher in the elementary where she worked. She felt racism from the other teachers in the way that they talked about the children calling the mostly Puerto Rican student body “monkeys.” During this time of the late 1960s and early 1970s, Paula was involved in the movement working against racism and sexism, and she started feeling angry about the ways she saw racism working out. She acknowledges that “the first feelings of empowerment came as a result of getting pissed at what was happening to [herself] and others” during this time. She remembers getting an afro and having more connections to Black women. At the time, she also dated her first husband, who she identified as a Black Puerto Rican and as having a very strong political/racial consciousness. As a result of being involved with a women of color group, Paula created an activist identity and that had an impact on her overall identity.

Paula defines internalized racism as “the racism of society that a person absorbs and internalizes as their own so that the individual is also “racist” against themselves. She believes it has many components including identification with the aggressor and need for immediate gratification. Paula feels like internalized racism caused her to “wither”—wither in the sense of self-doubt about her intellect. She admits that she sometimes still struggles with feeling that on an intellectual level because of the racism she faced in the all White schools she attended. The racist beliefs that she took in as a result were internalized, and she sometimes compares herself to others, seeing them as smarter than her.

In juxtaposition, Paula sees liberation from internalized racism as a “full flowering across all of [your] life gifts” and defines it as knowing who you are, accepting



who you are and being proud. She named that as internalized racism started to leave her, she was starting to feel good about her hair, feel proud, while she was getting an insight about racism and becoming an activist.

Paula feels that internalized racism is and will be an ongoing issue as a result of being raised in a racist society. She believes, “It’s gonna come up again and again” but hopefully in a progressive way—that what is felt today will not be the same that is felt tomorrow – but she doesn’t believe it disappears. Paula believes that another piece of liberation work is to recognize that she’s on this path in her other identities as well, and that she’ll be on it forever—that “there’s no big period.”

It is in relationship to others that Paula feels most liberated. Both her first and second husbands, her second husband having a strong African American and Black identity, have supported her the most in her liberation journey. Her relationships with other women of color have also supported her growth as she feels like her relationships are more authentic, more full, and less self-silencing. Paula feels like her process of liberation has given her a richer community—not just in her town but also a world community to identify with and connect to. She feels like it has given her a life purpose—creating a just and equitable society—along with a certain amount of ease and joy.

She feels “pretty satisfied” with where she is in her liberation journey and feels that teaching about racism gives her the opportunity to stay connected to the work. Paula feels that staying connected to people, particularly Black people, will help in her liberation journey as will continuing to learn will help her stay on in the liberation

process. She feels that the process has been both “awful” and “enlightening” but feels like she came out the other side fairly whole.

I mean it’s better to feel good about yourself than to be constantly worrying about, “Am I too this? Or am I not enough that?” One of my friends says, you know, that’s what it’s like being a woman of color. You’re always too much of this and too little of that. And so I think [a process of liberation] gets you out of that conundrum, you know. (Paula 2)

### Stephanie

Where when I was, I think, less liberated and more internalized, it would be like that incident or situation would like destroy me for the day. And it would make me question, again, whether I should be here, am I good enough, you know, am I smart enough? Do people respect me? Do people like me? Do people care? Blah, blah, blah. I have all those conversations in my head. Meanwhile, people aren’t thinking about me; they’re thinking about their own stupid stuff all day too. But it just made me a less productive professional, a less productive me. (Stephanie 2)

Stephanie is a 39-year-old administrator at a college in Vermont. She is light brown skin with thin, shoulder length locks. Her family lived for a short time in Atlanta and Ohio, but she was born and raised primarily in Long Island, New York in a predominately White neighborhood. Stephanie feels like she always had a positive Black identity and feels like she grew up in a family with a variety of pigments and skin tones that had pride in being Black.

In Long Island, she experienced racial tension with the White kids in the neighborhood and remembers them asking her and her brother “dumb” questions like “Why the insides of [their] hands [were] White and the outsides of [your] hands brown?” She remembers her father sitting her down one day and warning she and her brother about not going over to a neighbor’s house who was a self-proclaimed Klansman. Stephanie also remembers being called the N-word and being told to “go back to Africa”

at school and she and her brother not telling their parents. She felt the need to protect her parents from the traumas and other microaggressions that they experienced at school.

Stephanie remembers being pretty Black-identified in high school. She had White friends, but her “road dogs,” the people that she hung out with after school were Black people, and she is still friends with many of them today. She named that they needed and wanted to be around other Black people as a “direct result of the Whiteness” that was around them. But back at school, Stephanie found herself struggling. She now believes that Black women in predominantly White environments have a hard time around relationships and at the time she could not navigate “the boyfriend thing,” both because of her racial identity and because she believes that she knew she was a lesbian then, though she was not out.

Stephanie also remembers there being a lot of discussion comments about her fairer skin tone, finer hair, and appearance. She remembers being obsessed with her hair and wanting to fit in with the White girls. She constantly straightened her hair and trying to dress and emulate the White girls despite “not having a White girl’s body.” Stephanie often used her humor, much of it being self-deprecating, to deal with high school situations.

After high school, Stephanie attended a community college and there hung out with mostly Black people. She felt like in that setting, her “eyes were really being opened” as a result of getting more information on Black history. She was able to get even more immersed in Blackness when she attended the 4-year college in New York where she did her bachelor’s and master’s programs. During the experience of getting her bachelor’s degree, Stephanie came out as lesbian and her friend group changed. She

began hanging out with White people more again because “the gay space [on campus] was a White space,” so the people who affirmed her sexuality were White. She says it “wasn’t about assimilation”—she remained friends with Black people—but rather, “it was just about comfort.”

Stephanie’s first relationship with a woman was with a White woman. Stephanie says she was very much rooted in her Blackness and felt like she was being “authentically Black,” but she was with a White woman. The relationship felt very challenging because she wondered how people were judging her. Stephanie would try to “Blacken up” her partner by saying that her partner had a bigger butt like a Black woman or fuller lips. This concern was coming from inside and Stephanie had to (reason) if she was dating this person because she was White. She and her partner broke up and she decided that she couldn’t date White people anymore because it felt too complicated.

Stephanie defines internalized racism as “wanting to be White in any of its forms” —physically, the way you carry yourself, even; the way you manage class; and feels that its complicated and has many different manifestations. One of the ways she named that she manifested internalized racism was around her intellect. In starting her current job at a predominately White institution, she found herself feeling anxiety about speaking. In previous roles like the one she is in now, she had not experienced anxiety and was internalizing how she thought White people perceived her. She constantly questioned if she was articulate enough, “White enough,” or well mannered enough for the predominately White student body and their parents. She says she often got stage fright in front of large groups, and it left her feeling inadequate. Some of her White colleagues

gave her a difficult time when she was starting the job and her internalized racism caused her to question her skills, ability, and whether she deserved the job.

During this time, Stephanie was wrestling with intellectual internalized racism. She realizes that she was in her head a lot and not as connected with others. She also believes that experience hurt her home life because she felt she had to keep up an act all day at work and that would cause her to “unleash a dragon” or release a lot of frustration on her partner and kids when she arrived home. Stephanie realized the way to be successful on the campus was to be her authentic self and break the construct of feeling like she has to conform or to fit into the White way of a being, or accepted as the normalized way of being.

Stephanie recognized that her ability to be authentic in her diction, language, and communication allows her to speak comfortably to a variety of people—from the university president to the campus custodian. It offers her a lot of leverage and power and ability to cross racial and class lines.

A culmination of things jump-started her liberation, but she says it was mainly “just the tiredness that comes with feeling inferior.” She says she grew tired of feeling less than. She said amid the tiredness came this revelation that she didn’t want to feel inferior anymore, and though she didn’t “just bust out of it,” she was working toward not feeling like that anymore. Stephanie also believes that her coming out as a lesbian assisted with her process of liberation from internalized racism. Stephanie believed like her Blackness, she considered her sexual orientation innate and realized that she might lose friendships and other relationships when she came out. Stephanie was able to reason in that process that she already experienced as a Black-identified person losing

relationships and began questioning why she was trying to please everyone. She felt like coming out was “the first layer of beginning to reject the external messages and saying, ‘I am who I am. I have to accept myself for who I am or I’m gonna be miserable for the rest of my life.’”

Though she doesn’t often use the word liberation, she described the concept as “finding the divine/the whole within the self.” She thinks she’s a better person in her liberation—people genuinely like her because she’s being herself. Stephanie said she doesn’t feel she’s fully liberated, but when she had less consciousness of her internalized racism, her days were unhappy, she had less fun, she was not being herself, and it made her a less productive person. She feels like there are too many external forces playing into everyone, everyday to fully interrupt an individual’s internalized racism completely, but she thinks everyone should be on the process of liberation. Stephanie believes it was important for her because she wanted to be at peace with herself—accepted for her whole being. She does recognize that she still “regresses” or still does manifest internalized racism currently, but she’s much more forgiving of herself in her process of liberation. She sees her liberation like a filter—sometimes it’s going to catch the fine grains of old internalized racism, sometimes it’s not.

Though she has struggled in her job, she feels that her place of work helped her in her liberation. Stephanie feels that it offered the challenges that caused her to psychologically, intellectually, mentally, and emotionally grow and become who she is. Additionally, Stephanie is primary diversity trainer for her department and that role has continued to challenge her personally and give her opportunities to learn more about

racism and social justice. She says the more she understands the topics for herself, the more liberated she feels by the processes and conversations she is able to have.

When thinking about who has helped her in her process, she feels her partner has been a big support. Stephanie acknowledges that being partnered with another Black woman offers her the opportunity to process things with her and to have her voice validated. Additionally, Stephanie has surrounded herself with a supportive community who gets race and racism on some level. Her community doesn't have to be perfect but just a safe space. She has continued to feel connected to her Black friends and chooses only to surround herself with White people who are on the liberation journey themselves and who she describes as “[having] picked up their knapsack” (in reference to the Peggy McIntosh [1998] article about White privilege) and are trying to be better and can have conversations about race and gender.

Though “not always fun” and sometimes “painful, confusing, and challenging” Stephanie believes that the liberation journey is a necessary one, and she feels like every person of color has to go through this process of liberation if they want some freedom. She said,

You either deal with your internalized racism, or you kind of drown in it. And it becomes the thorn in your side, the pain in your ass for your entire life and you just go to your grave miserable, dealing doesn't mean fully resolving—thinks you can become at peace in terms of turning off those tapes that are playing in your head.

She feels like she has to get this process out of the way “so [she] can get to the next stage of [her] life” and she believes that “whatever is happening, it's necessary.” She said “[some days] the process is empowering, ... some days it's depressing, some days

filled with anger, pride, joy, frustration—a real rollercoaster ride” but believe it’s the way its supposed to be and that she wouldn’t exchange her experience at all.

So I wouldn’t trade this journey for anything. Not that I have anything else to compare it to, because I was born a Black person, I’ll always be Black—this ain’t paint. But I just can’t imagine being something else, because I just think that being something else would—I don’t know, there’s an emptiness to it, to me, that I don’t want to experience. I like the complexity, the emotion of being a person of color because I just feel like I live a much more enriched life, and I feel like White people don’t. (Stephanie 3)

### Tabitha

So, psychologically, which connects to the emotions, which is wrapped up in the spirit, which then—psychologically, emotions, behaviors—I act out stuff based on the psychology that I’m carrying around. That’s what internalized racism then is. The taking in of the stuff and then it messing with you so much to where that you are not the being that you were born on this earth to be. (Tabitha 1)

Tabitha is a 37-year-old, tall, dark brown skinned woman who is currently a graduate student living in the Northeast who is originally from a Southern city. She grew up in a working-class predominately Black neighborhood in the South and attended predominately White schooling from pre-school through college. What Tabitha remembered most about her upbringing and schooling was having to code switch as she was bussed from one side of her diverse hometown, to a predominately White, upper-middle-class neighborhood where her school was. She described it as somewhat of a “balancing act,” trying to balance her Black, working-class neighborhood and family, with the White, upper-middle-class friendships she was developing at school. Tabitha remembered feeling like she “was in her neighborhood, but she really wasn’t in it,” that she felt safe and connected to the neighborhood where her school was but was fearful and not connected to the people in neighborhood where her house was. Tabitha recalled that she learned early that there were rules to race—that there were things Black people were



supposed to be able to do, and other things that they were not able to do and that race has felt like it has always been “omnipresent” in her life.

As a result of her early schooling and upbringing, she feels like she has always seen the world through the lens of race. Tabitha remembered feeling like White people had all of the power and feels that her internalized racism manifested through that lens. She remembers always trying to prove that she was Black enough by hanging out with Black people, but also remembers taking up for White people and trying to prove to her Black friends that White people were okay. She found herself continuing to live between two worlds also with the organizations she chose in high school and college. In high school she was a member of the mostly Black basketball team while balancing relationships on the mostly White yearbook staff. In college she was committee chair of the Black Awareness Committee and participated on the mostly White board of the Orientation Program. Tabitha also believes that she received some of her internalized racism from her parents and that she embodies some of their fear and protection about being Black in a racist society.

As a result of her advanced schooling, Tabitha has developed a complex understanding of race, racism, and oppression dynamics and now believes that internalized racism has to do with “our psychology,” and that it includes the ways that the mind is shifted into false beliefs about the self through the eyes of a racist society. She believes that internalized racism “morphs the self and prevents people from being the self they are meant to be.” Internalized racism distorts relationships. She believes that she had low consciousness about her internalized racism until she was 30 years old, that she

started the beginning steps to eradicate it at 32 or 33 and started waging “all out war” against it at 36 and continues today.

Tabitha believes that her relationships and friendships were affected most because she felt disconnected from her life—that she missed being in her life. She feels that internalized racism trapped her physically, emotionally, and mentally not able to access the world outside of her. Like others in the course of our interviews, Tabitha had an experience where her latent internalized racism surfaced but understands that it’s deep enough that she was “sitting here looking at it” or examining it in the interviews and it still “bit [her] in the ass.” Tabitha feels her strongest internalized racism manifestation that she struggles with is to be accepted by other Black people or to be considered Black enough and remembers being called an oreo and sellout. She talked about the fear of having her “Black card” revoked, or being called out by fictitious Black police and having them say, “You don’t know who you are,” and that it would be like “having your soul called out.”

Tabitha feels pretty lucky that she has some consciousness about internalized racism because she feels others get tripped up by their internalized racist thoughts, such as, “Why can’t I get it right?” or “Is it because I’m Black?” She believes that

the system of oppression or racism digs a hole, and then people of color start digging the hole ourselves when the thoughts are taken in and believed, and she feels that the majority of Black people are still digging the hole—internalized racism is doing the work of racism for ourselves, on ourselves. (Tabitha 1)

Tabitha notices the most change in her relationships now that she considers herself on the path of liberation. She experiences her relationships with more depth of feeling now that she consciously is challenging her internalized racism—that she’s “actually present” and doesn’t feel as afraid of showing up in them. Though she doesn’t

feel that the racial make up of her friendships has changed (She still has friends from all racial groups)—just that her experience of them has changed. Liberation was a very internal process that helped her “be” in her relationships differently and still have White people and people of color in her life. She sees herself continuing to be diligent about noticing her internalized racism and continuing to confront it—sees herself continuing to develop her liberatory consciousness. Tabitha feels that liberation gives “an opportunity of more vividness in life” and that internalized racism prevents us from noticing the color on the trees and “completely miss so much of our lives.”

For people seeking a path of liberation from internalized racism, she believes that it’s important for an individual to find a community that will challenge their thinking, that the individual read and learn about an oppression framework in order to understand that they’re not the problem, develop a spiritual practice, and “not be afraid to question everything that they thought they knew.” Tabitha says that we don’t have a map for liberation and, therefore, to be a Black, African American woman in the process of liberation is both rewarding and confusing.

Like I get to read more about myself, I get to manifest outside what I feel inside. So the path is connecting more with myself in this liberated Black body, therefore connecting more with the world. I am open to whatever that might look like. And just being fully in my life, my relationships, my connections. (Tabitha 3)

## CHAPTER 5

### THEMES AND PATTERNS IN THE DATA

As the overarching question of the dissertation, “What is (are) the experiences of African American women engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism?” requires knowing how participants understand internalized racism and liberation. This chapter presents emergent themes noticed in the interviews with the participants. For both phenomenon, internalized racism and liberation, I note themes that coalesced around definitions, manifestations, and finally consequences or the impact of the phenomena on the participants’ lives. For example, participants noted themes of *taking on the oppressive thoughts of the dominant culture* and *self-loathing/ believing in one’s own inferiority* as themes for their definition of internalized racism. This chapter will discuss the noted themes and connect them to literature reviewed for the study. Additionally, in the participant responses, I noted significant findings about factors that support the participants in the process of liberation and end the chapter with those findings. Lastly, it is important to note that Denise’s voice is largely absent from the quotes that are listed as examples for the themes listed. Denise could be considered a negative case in the research study and her perspective will be explored at the end of the chapter.

#### Internalized Racism

##### Definition of Internalized Racism

The pre-interview questionnaire (APPENDIX C) completed by participants did not include a definition of internalized racism, but instead focused on the ways in which participants cognitively and behaviorally manifested internalized racism in their lives in

the past or currently as noted in the literature (Akbar, 1996; Bivens, 2005; Bryant, 2000; Flynn, 2000; Hill, 1995; hooks, 1995; Norrington-Sands, 2002 ). During the interviews, as a way of contextualizing participants' responses, I asked participants to provide their definition of internalized racism. Additionally, I asked for stories or examples of how they saw internalized racism manifested in their lives. These questions provided the opportunity to contextualize how participants saw their experience with internalized racism and grasp the way that they make meaning of their process of liberation. If participants defined internalized racism in a vast, complicated way and felt that they still have manifestations of internalized racism occurring in their lives, individuals' might not be so secure in their process of liberation. The opposite seemed true, as well. If participants' define internalized racism by one specific manifestation, they might believe that liberation is accomplishable and perhaps have a very simplistic view of how to reach liberation. As will be noted later, of the participants who believed that they were in a process of liberation, none of the participants saw liberation as a static point that they were attempting to reach.

When analyzing the participants' responses about the phenomenon of internalized racism, I noticed that many of the participants in the study spoke about it being a complex phenomenon that exists in their lives. Over half of participants specifically mentioned the "complicated" nature of internalized racism. When asked about her definition of internalized racism, Marisa, who is in a graduate program studying social justice issues and therefore, has potentially more theoretical knowledge of the phenomenon, explains her confusion about the definition,

Yeah, I don't know, like I'm having a hard time fully understanding the definitions, - like internalized racism in terms of our own internalized

discrimination against other Black people, like is that what's going on? Or is internalized racism our own sense of inferiority or unease in a White world? You know, so it feels like a complicated thing. (Marisa 1)

Lauren echoed Marisa's confusion about internalized racism and talked about how her definition started to change as a result of challenges from friends and her own continued self-reflection. She previously believed that internalized racism was mostly about disliking one's appearance but now understands that it includes more nuanced behaviors.

I've started to understand (internalized racism) as being much more complicated - than I guess sort of thinking about not just your appearance, and not just saying, 'Oh, I'm African American,' and that's bad or something. But even in thinking just about the way - I guess sort of the way that I sort of put up with things that I shouldn't put up with. (Lauren 2)

Earlene sums up the complex nature that seemed to plague the participants by talking about the sinister nature of internalized racism that seems to surface at any time, even when on the liberation journey. She says, "...it's insidious, you don't even realize that you still have pieces, so, something's apt to crop up tomorrow, but I'll think, "Oh man, I thought THAT?" (Earlene 1)

In order to find a clearer definition of internalized racism, some of the participants offered descriptions for internalized racism by using metaphors of the phenomenon to further explain the effect that internalized racism had on their lives. In their book, *Making Sense of Qualitative Data*, Coffey and Atkinson (1996) offer that "at its simplest, a metaphor is a device of representation through which new meaning may be learned" and that in the metaphors that participants use to describe the phenomenon it is possible to find further meaning that the participant makes about the phenomenon being discussed (Coffey & Antkinson, 1996, p.84). Half of participants used metaphorical examples to describe their experience of internalized racism. Metaphorical themes that was drawn

from the participants' responses described internalized racism as "chains" or "a prison" that limited participants' experience in their lives. In describing internalized racism with images such as chains, slavery, "mental shackles", an anchor, a glass box, and a prison points to the distinct limiting experience that the participants have felt as a result of the internalized racism. Participants noted feeling constantly held back from a fuller life by internalized racism and the way that the phenomenon works in their lives. Tabitha noted that she felt like her relationships were limited by the ways that internalized racism limited her,

I missed significant moments in my life because I was caught up in the box that internalized racism had caught me in- mentally, psychologically, emotionally – caught... and that's what I think about in, you know, relationships, I could not emotionally (share myself). And I think that was about internalized racism. (Tabitha 1)

Liza described internalized racism as "prison bars" throughout her interviews and connected the limiting nature of internalized racism to a reason that she and others sometimes choose not to move toward liberation, even though she recognizes that by holding the bars she's hurting herself. She says,

"...maybe it's easier to keep on doing what you're accustomed to doing even if it's not good for you, because you know what's gonna happen. I mean, it's known territory, it's a known world, but if you put the bars down, it's gonna be the unknown and then, if you try to do what you've really wanted to do, what you've had the passion for, and you fail, by God you've just proven all of those self doubts. It's like, well fuck that, it might be safer (to stay in internalized racism).

Interviewer: I'll hold the bars.

Liza : I'll hold the bars. Except that I'm the one dying by holding the bars." (Liza 1)

Two main themes surfaced when I asked participants how they defined internalized racism, *Taking on the oppressive thoughts of dominant culture* and *Self-loathing or believing in own inferiority*.

## Taking on the Oppressive Thoughts of a Dominant Culture

Not surprisingly, with whites having the social, political and economic power in a racist U.S. society (Feagin, 2006), many of the participants defined internalized racism as taking on or upholding dominant white culture. Earlene noted the ways in which the dominant white cultural standards might become part of the psyche of a Black person wrestling with internalized racism and how it might affect how the Black person views the world.

I define (internalized racism) as when you basically take the oppressive and racist thoughts of the dominant White culture and you believe them and they become a part of your psyche. And so you believe that black is not beautiful. You believe that White is better. (Earlene 1)

Stephanie echoed that sentiment as she, too, defined internalized racism as adopting dominant white culture, but also wanting to adopt white cultural practices, behaviors, and appearance.

I see internalization as wanting to be white, in any of its forms. Whether it be your hair, or your eyes. Whether it be your physical, whether it be the way you speak, the way you carry yourself, - the way you manage class. (Stephanie 1)

For Marisa, she understood the definition in the way she valued white culture more than she valued black and African American culture. In her interviews, she discussed feeling like in her struggles with internalized racism that she had put white people on a pedestal.

For my life, I feel like internalized racism is the valoration, - having internalized the idea on some level that white people are better, that white people are more enlightened, more open-minded, more free, more educated, more whatever – then more spiritual – and that was a really dangerous one for me that I’m still undoing – more spiritual than Black people. (Marisa 1)

As a result of defining internalized racism as adopting the oppressive ideals of a dominant white culture, it is not surprising that as Black and African American women,



the other theme that surfaced among participants was a definition of *self-loathing and the belief in one's own inferiority*.

### Self-Loathing / Believing in Own Inferiority

The majority of the participants gave examples of self-loathing or believing in their own inferiority as answers to questions requesting examples or manifestations of internalized racism, though only half of the participants named self-loathing as a definition. When defining internalized racism in this way, participants often shared personal examples of how self-loathing showed up in their lives. As an example of this theme, Liza talked about believing all of the negative things that society says about Black people including stereotypes and examples of scientific racism, and specifically feeling like she has no control in how to challenge it.

I, at the deepest level believe in what people say about me. Believe in the stereotypes, believe in the inadequacy, believe in everything about Sambo and drapetomania and that it may not apply to all black people, but it applies to me in spades... And that I have no control. I have no authority or agency to remove it. I have no ability. Yeah, that's how I would define it. (Liza 1)

Glenda agreed with Liza as she also discussed the self-loathing that she adopted as a result of the negative messages that the society has about Blacks. Her self-loathing surfaced as a result of not wanting to be any of the stereotypes that she learned about Blacks. She found herself loathing Blackness and therefore, herself.

I'm defining it as self-loathing. Not only self-loathing, but loathing or hating Blackness in some respects. Internalizing the messages that were negative about Black people, which is part of the reason why I loathed myself, because I didn't wanna be what those messages were. (Glenda 1)

The definitions that participants give of their experience of internalized racism correspond to the definitions as reviewed by theorists in the literature. Having

participants speak about the limiting nature of their experience and the interruption of the spiritual, psychological and emotional expression in their lives corresponds to literature from Speight, 2007. Other ways that participants defined internalized racism include hating Blackness, devaluing Black people, and Black on Black discrimination

Though these two themes surfaced as the way that most participants defined internalized racism, the nuanced ways in which these definitions get manifested behaviorally and attitudinally in participants' lives were also significant.

#### Behavioral and Attitudinal Manifestations of Internalized Racism

In their first interview, many participants told stories of experiencing racism in grade school or high school at the hands of racist teachers or classmates – experiences which imbedded themselves in participants' psyches. Though the cause of internalized racism is outside of the scope of this study, participants noted the ways in which some of those experiences influenced their thinking and created attitudinal and behavioral manifestations of internalized racism. The exploration of these manifestations of internalized racism provides more insight to the ways in which individuals may understand internalized racism and the way it manifests in their lives.

The themes were culled from interview questions such as 'can you give examples of how internalized racism manifests or manifested in your life?' and 'describe a day when you had less conscious awareness of internalized racism in your life'. Their responses to these questions and interview prompts show that the themes presented here are manifestations that participants are conscious of in their lives. As stated earlier, because internalized racism is such a complex phenomenon, some participants realized

that they might have other behavioral and attitudinal manifestations that they are not yet aware of.

Additionally, it should be noted that the patterns mentioned below tend to link closely together either building on one another, or seemingly having a direct link to another pattern. For example, the pattern *Believing physical/behavioral traits associated with Blacks are bad* might influence the theme of *self-devaluing* because the participant associates herself with being Black. Because she believes being Black has negative traits associated with it as a result of racism and learned stereotypes, this belief might affect the way that she sees herself. The themes are not mutually exclusive, though understanding the exact connection between the themes is outside the scope of this study. The themes that were mentioned by over half of the participants were: *Choosing to be separate from Black community or other Black people*, *Thinking physical/behavioral traits associated with Blacks are negative*, *Self-devaluing*, *Not feeling black enough/Thinking there is a particular way to be black*, *Not feeling smart enough*, and a theme Jackson (1976) in his writing about racial identity development calls “*White is right.*”

As you read through these themes, note the ways in which they are examples of descriptors that Jackson uses in his stages of Black identity development to represent individuals in the acceptance stage. The participants manifest both conscious and unconscious ideologies of racial dominance and subordination (Jackson, 2001).

### Choosing to be Separate from Black Community or Other Black People

Over half of the participants gave examples of feeling a separation from or wanting to be seen as separate from the larger African American and Black population or from other Black individuals. In analyzing the data, some participants' were able to voice thoughts about wanting to be seen as separate, though might not have acted on those thoughts. Other participants found themselves physically choosing not to interact with other Blacks and African Americans. Paula gave an example of the embarrassment she felt after seeing Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. speak on television with her white classmates while in college. She said,

So my sophomore year (of college), Martin Luther King is giving (a speech) – so we're all in the lounge playing bridge and listening to the TV and smoking cigarettes... And Martin Luther King was on, and I remembered being extremely embarrassed ...Because we see him as such a great orator. All I heard then was his southern accent, and he sounded to me ignorant. I was embarrassed. So there's an identification - I knew I was black, I knew I would - you know, I was associated with him, and I was like 'ugh.' (Paula 1)

Paula clearly saw her racial connection to Martin Luther King, Jr. as a Black person, but was embarrassed at the association that her classmates might make to what she described as "ignorant." Glenda told a similar story of not wanting to be associated with other black students in the seminary that she attended. She chose not to attend the Black caucus meetings where other Black students gathered because she didn't want to be seen with them. She connected this lack of association to both her struggle with her racial identity and named it as a manifestation of internalized racism.

There was a Black group at the seminary - I never would go. I'd get invitations to come meet with the Black caucus, and never would go because I didn't wanna be seen with - I didn't wanna be one of the Black kids sitting together with the other Black kids. And by that point, even though I was really wrestling with Blackness a lot by that point - I mean my early 20s were intense time of struggle and self-reflection. (Glenda 1)

Lastly, Earlene told of a time, also while in school where she was embarrassed to be racially linked to a Black woman in her graduate school class about her fear of being in a predominately white setting.

When I first came here to graduate school in 1989, there was an African American woman there who was - crazy. I was trying to think of a nice way of saying it. When she came here, she was so insecure about being Black and here, and there were all kind of intersectionalities for her-, she was probably poor...She was very dark. I remember that. So there were all these things going for her and she got up in a meeting and, she said, 'I was so scared being here with all you white people, that I didn't leave my room for a week. I didn't even go take a shower.' So I cringed, and I'm now on the floor, like 'Oh my god! She's embarrassing all of us Black people.' So it took me a year, maybe, to really think about that and said, 'crap, we have a right to be crazy like everybody else.' You know, why should that-, but I was like personally (offended) and I was like, 'Oh god, why is she saying that? She's making us all look bad.' I mean, I REALLY- but, I didn't at that moment realized that's what (internalized racism) was. (Earlene 1)

It should be noted that all three of these examples, and there were additional from other participants, happened in predominately white school settings. Therefore, the setting and audience potentially affected how internalized racism manifested itself.

#### Believing Physical/Behavioral Traits Associated with Blackness as Negative

Again, as a result of racism and learned stereotypes, well over half of the participants provided clear examples of manifestations that exemplified their belief that physical and behavioral traits associated with Blackness were negative. Responses ranged from participants disliking their own hair and skin tone, to not wanting associate themselves with others because of individuals' physical traits. Liza exemplified this by plainly stating that "(internalized racism is) why I hate my hair. I hate my eye color. I hate my skin color. I hate the shape of my nose. I hate my lips." (Liza 1) Her negative

belief about particular hair texture, eye color, skin tones and nose shapes associated with Blacks increased her own hatred of her own physical appearance.

Lauren, who stopped straightening her hair after a cancer diagnosis, now wears her hair in a natural styled two strand twists. She tells the story of the dilemma she faced after she decided to wear her natural hair.

...I had other like African American people saying to me, "Oh, you should (wear your hair natural)... it'll be great. You'll feel good about yourself." And I was like 'yeah, you're just saying that because you've got a big fro'. But it wasn't until like I had this (non African American) person who I really wanted to see me as an attractive person saying that 'I think that would be really cute on you.' I think that some of that about myself, I think about those moments where I'm even now, I usually have the twist, but sometimes I'll just have like an afro, and then I'm all super-self-conscious about it, like people are gonna think I have really bad hair. I won't go very many days (with a fro), or I'll only do it if (I've just taken the) twists out. Like I was teaching this past year in Boston, the students all liked it, and I would just be like so like self-conscious, like 'oh, don't look at my hair.' They're like, 'we like it like that,' you know, and I'm like 'oh.' So, I think some of it is racial, some of it I just think is just me and not great self-esteem. (Lauren 1)

Lauren found herself needing approval from "non-African American" people to approve of her hair for it to be acceptable to her, and even then she still struggled. In this next quote, Lauren continues her observation, realizing her negative opinion of Black physical traits. She tells a story of her realization of her dislike of darker skin.

... I was visiting one of my cousins and their kid. My mom was saying, 'Oh, you know, they had this kid who's almost two now', and my mom was saying how cute she was. I said, (whispers) 'oh, but she's so dark. She's not even two, and she's really dark.' And I couldn't figure out why did I say that? You know, why does that even matter? But it matters to me - obviously it matters to me because I said it. I mean my first reaction was 'she's so young, and she's already so black'. And my mom said, 'Well, what do you think your kids are gonna look like?', and I was like, 'I don't know I guess I never really thought about it.' (Lauren 2)

In both of Lauren's examples above, she clearly identifies as Black or African American, but has strong feelings, that are sometimes not conscious to her, about traditionally Black physical traits as negative.

Paula supplies an additional example of not wanting to be associated with a man she dated in college because he was Black. She goes on to question other reasons that she might not want to date him, but it is very clear that she first determined that she didn't like dating him because of his racial identity.

Then in my senior year, I dated a Black guy, African American guy, who was, you know, it was just a fascinating experience. I mean on the one hand, I didn't like dating a black guy because he was Black - I mean that. On the other hand, I was enough of an already-psychologist to be observing my own responses and questioning my own responses, and what is it about Steven that you don't like? Is it that he's Black? Is that you don't really hit it off - I mean it's not a perfect match? So I guess it was - I don't know what was enlightening - maybe I was getting enlightened along the way. (Paula 1)

Paula's example could be read as both not wanting to date him because of his skin tone or because of his race. Either way, Paula was clear that she did not want to be associated with him.

### Self-Devaluing

Undoubtedly, balancing the realization of having a Black racial identity while holding negative beliefs about Black people could lead participants to devaluing their own ability to contribute to the world around them. At least three-fourths of the participants spoke of feelings of shame, dislike of self, and feeling unattractive as a way that they manifested internalized racism consciously or unconsciously. Earlene, again, tells the story of being concerned about how she was being perceived in all white settings

as an African American. In this example she speaks of the shame that she felt and how that shame lead her to believe that she was not able to contribute.

And so, to me, I just remember feeling shame and so much so that if (I) went places, - I can remember being the only, African American someplace, and being over in a corner, and not feeling like I was, - that I could have a contribution, or if I did contribute, I was so concerned that I would do something that would be stereotypic, whatever that was. Like, [White people] really have one stereotype? They don't... I'd spend all my time at those kind settings trying to think, 'ok, how can I prove that I'm not what they think', you know. (Earlene 2)

Paula's next example links the previous theme with a feeling of self-devaluing. She tells the story of feeling like there was something wrong with her as a teenage girl because she made the association that boys didn't like her because she was 'colored'.

So I'm colored, and that means my hair is awful - I think that would be the main thing - (I) think that would be the main association, with hair. Or I'm colored, and that's why these guys don't wanna go out with me, definitely. And with that - yeah, there was something wrong with me as a teenage girl, because you always want attention from whatever your potential partners are. I kinda knew it was them, but it more felt like me, -something wrong with me that they don't like. And then what they don't like is my being colored - I knew that. (Paula 1)

Lauren, again, exemplified self-devaluing as a manifestation of internalized racism in reference to her social scene in high school. Lauren shared that in high school a majority of her friends were white and she, too, didn't feel like she would be seen as someone that they would want to date.

I think I thought pretty like poorly of myself. I think, I thought I was ugly and fat and, you know, just not -like I didn't date in high school because I just didn't think people could or should see me that way-, that (the people who) were in my social circle who were mostly white people, so of course they wouldn't - I wouldn't expect them to wanna, hang out with me, so I didn't date at all. (Lauren 1)

### Not Feeling 'Black enough'/Believing in the Essentialist Black Myth

At the same time that participants wrestled with not exemplifying stereotypically Black traits or wanting to be seen as separate from the larger Black or African American



community, they also struggled with wanting to be seen as ‘Black enough’ by other Black people. Over half of the 11 participants talked about struggling with the belief that they at times did not feel like they were being perceived as ‘black enough’ by other Blacks and African Americans. It is complex that many participants cited that they did not feel black enough, indicating that even though they wanted to separate themselves from other blacks, they wanted to at the same time be seen by other blacks as culturally connected through a performance of blackness or black culture. Participants who manifested internalized racism in this way spoke about believing that there was an essentialist way of behaving, speaking, or acting Black. I noted that this particular manifestation was given as an example of both a manifestation of internalized racism that appeared in the past, but also currently in the midst of their liberation journey. Marisa gave the example of feeling like she was being seen as a ‘white girl/black girl’ in an interaction with her co-workers,

I was in the office, and there were two black women there, talking, they both are my colleagues, I know them well, and I was aware of that feeling of feeling uncomfortable, ‘am I Black enough?’ Am I gonna be-, because one of the women is really interesting and really out there and she’s also, she has the particular friends... I have a good repoire with everybody, but sometimes I feel like her energy is really kind of exclusionary and judgemental, and I kinda felt that feeling, even though I know it’s really just her personality and her issues, but kinda felt that feeling of, ‘oh god, I’m kinda like that White girl/Black girl thing, you know like that old feeling that I’ve felt so many times in my life.’ (Marisa 3)

As Marisa states, she experienced the feeling of being seen as the “White girl/Black girl” from other Black people previously and it resurfaces in this situation with her current colleagues. Though it does not show up as one of the themes in the following liberation section, some participants who gave this example of internalized racism spoke later in the

interviews that as part of their liberation journey they began to understand that there was no one way to be Black. Marisa reflections about her co-workers continues,

And now being able to think about that and be like, 'well no, I don't have to go there, I don't have to let myself feel marginalized.' I've also recognized that like one person doesn't have this total scoop on Blackness. And that we're individuals and that, you know, she has her particular thing and I have my particular thing. (Marisa 3)

In Tabitha's example, she tells the story of her fear not feeling Black enough when she attends an orientation for students of color while in college.

... it's like my first year we had an orientation for folks of color and I went because my momma said I had to and I was a good kid that didn't realize that my mother wasn't down the hall. But I didn't want to go. I was scared. I was not Black enough. I was gonna be found out. I was not gonna be cool enough. It was nerve wracking. (Tabitha 2)

During the time of our interviews, she too faced a moment with a Black male colleague where she felt the familiar feeling of not being seen as Black enough and reflected on how the feeling of not being Black enough is still very present in her liberation journey. She speaks poignantly about that experience,

Yeah, it's thick still. Very, and it's weird because I haven't felt it in a long time. Maybe because I am around a whole bunch of white people. Or, I get it every once in a while at my workplace, and I tell myself, wait a second, these (Black) young people are probably struggling with the same thing, and you need to model a strength in that. They are not looking at you going, 'you are not black enough Tabitha' but, with my peers, - All Mitchell had to do was say he was disappointed. I was destroyed. I was done. Done. It just raised all kinds of questions for me, 'are you still doing the same things you have always done of giving White people too much room?' and, 'have you not changed at all?' and 'look at you, you are still not with the people of color, what is that all about?' And 'maybe you are still an oreo, and, all of it came back.' Having that interaction with Mitchell over the phone, and to hear him say that he was disappointed, it landed on me much differently than I am sure it was meant. I think it was meant from a perspective of, "I wouldn't choose to do what you are choosing to do, and I'm a little bit surprised that you are," I took it as 'him as Black man, who knows himself - he just called you out, and you just lost all kind of black points.' Metaphorically, it's like having the Black police pull up and arrest you in front of everybody. It's like they can see inside of you, and they are like calling you out,

like your soul out, and saying, "yeah, you are a poser." It's like, "you don't know who you are". And that, that's slightly painful (laughs). (Tabitha 2)

### White is Right

The last theme in this section, which was mentioned by six of the eleven participants, is named as “white is right” because participants mentioned examples of believing that White people, culture, and White features as better than Black or African American people, culture or facial features. Marisa tells the story that when she had less consciousness of her internalized racism, that she believed White people could offer something that Black people could not.

I think I was trying to do my best, but now that I look at it, when I look back into the past, I feel like it's in a certain way an activation of something that's always unconsciously transmitted to you, that White people are somehow better than Black people. So in my case, it was the alternative bohemian spiritual place that seemed possible with kind of White people versus my own people. So I don't know that it was any conscious thing. I feel like there's probably always on the cusp some idea that White people are better or that White people can offer something, you know, more than what Black people can offer. (Marisa 1)

As noted above, Marisa believes that she received those messages as an unconscious transmission of a racist society. As exemplified in her profile, she specifically wrestled with the power that she gave to white classmates to provide validation that she felt she was not receiving from her black family. Nicole found herself in a similar position as she was growing up. In addition to not liking her features, she sought validation from whites in her life, and found herself actually wanting to be white.

I wanted to be White. Because actually before it was just not liking my features. But once it got to the point where I like wanted to be Kathy's daughter, that's when I like really was just like I wanna be White. When she declined to take me in, then I knew it was because I was Black, so I wanted to be White even more. It was horrible... Well, I mean it definitely continued to play out as far as like me searching out, like a mother figure and different counselors or teachers. I was

always convinced that they would like me better or love me more if I were White. Aside from that, I can say that I often tried to distinguish myself from other Black people. (Nicole 2)

In her liberation journey, Nicole says she still wrestles with believing that white features and body type are better because the white standard of beauty persists. She says that more recently she still believed that her White partner, who she has been with two years, would prefer a White woman rather than Nicole.

Mostly in my relationship with my partner, it's still really hard for me to believe that - earlier on, it was hard for me to believe that she was like really attracted to me... I was certain that she would be more attracted to a white woman, there's no question for me. And because that standard of beauty persists, and it really hasn't changed - I don't care what nobody say - you know, they might have their little whatever, Halle Berry or whoever they think is -you know, but it hasn't really changed. And it's not just about race - you can talk about body type, all that bullshit, it hasn't changed. But as far as me, okay, I still don't completely believe 100% that my partner could be just as attracted to me as some other white woman. That's internalized racism. I don't believe that I'm as attractive as - no, its really like any it's more about features. Like if I had certain features that were more white, then I could see her being as attracted to me as like a white woman. (Nicole 2)

Tabitha told a similar story of at one time dating white men and though believing that they were exoticizing her, she also was believing that her relationship with them made her better. Only in her liberation journey has she been able to notice the ways that her thinking was “damaging” her.

...what has my experience been (with internalized racism)? It was good until I knew- it was good until I understood what it was. How it was damaging me. When I hear that question, I'm like, 'Right, when I didn't know when I was acting out internalized racism, I was just acting it out.' Though at the same time continuing the system of racism. So it wasn't good ...though at the same time, you know, essentially killing myself but I didn't know it. I didn't feel it. I didn't feel it in the way that I feel it now. Now it just like hurts. But when I was acting (internalized racism) out, when I was looking at white people and truly believing that they were better, when I was-, and I always tell this story of dating white men that they were exotifying (me) and, I think that was true, too. And the flip side was going on, as well, I was dating a white man (and thinking he was better)- like (I was) completely blind to it. Totally. So, it was good when I didn't know what it

was. And it just sounds crazy to say good- like "good" with big giant quotes around it. (Tabitha 1)

As Jackson (2001) states, “A Black person who consciously adopts the prevailing White view of the world, weakens his or her positive self-concept or positive view of Black people” (p. 20). This is yet one consequence of behavioral and attitudinal manifestations of internalized racism. During the interviews participants told stories of additional ramifications of the ways that internalized racism affected their lives.

### Consequences of Internalized Racism

Consequences of internalized racism can be defined as the suffering or impact of internalized racism on the participants’ lives and experiences in the world. As a continued answer to the research question, the data clearly shows that participants’ experiences and perceptions of themselves were shifted by internalized racism. When asked how has internalized racism affected your life, Debra poignantly responded, “I guess the question is how has it not affected me?” (Debra 1) Analyzing the data for themes about the impact was not so simple, as only three clear themes surfaced for the participants. Most of the data showed that internalized racism’s impact was wide reaching, affecting participants’ relationships – both friendships and intimate partnerships, their movement in the world (participants spoke about feeling constrained in expressing themselves), and that it caused them to constantly question themselves. The themes presented below, though not directly caused by the manifestation presented above, clearly are connected, though the causal link is outside of the scope of this dissertation.

This data seeks to explore the impact participants' lives and look beyond the examples of internalized racism. Rather it seeks to see how participants reflect on how they see their lives, understanding of themselves, and others shifted as a result of their internalized racism. This thematic section answers the research question in that it further explains the way that internalized racism impacted and affected participants' lives, beyond their attitudes and behaviors, providing a textured and richer picture of their experience of their liberation journey. Over half of the participants talked about *feeling low self-esteem or experiencing self loathing, feeling a separation from other blacks, sometimes particularly black family members, and overworking/working to disprove stereotypes associated with Blacks* as a result of their internalized racism.

#### Feeling of Low Self-Esteem/Self-Loathing

Many participants named their feelings of low-self esteem or self-loathing as an outcome or consequence of internalized racism. For Paula, internalized racism's "most profound impact" was that it caused her to doubt herself. She says, "I think that the most profound impact has been...that it's caused me to wither. Wither in the sense of self-doubt." (Paula 1)

Nicole joins Paula in acknowledging that internalized racism caused a sense of self-loathing for her. This self-loathing caused a feeling of constriction in her daily life where she often felt like she had to keep her feelings or ideas inside or work hard to get others to like her.

Some of that shit is sad to think about. Because so much of it is operating out of like self-loathing. You know, you could get a million examples of it. Yeah, it was a feeling of like constraint - it just feels tight trying to keep stuff in, down, or whatever. Or to try to be different, something else, or thinking about another way

that so-and-so would like me more. Yeah, it just feels really constrained, constricting, in a straight jacket or something. (Nicole 3)

Earlene continues that theme of feeling of being constricted by low-self esteem and doubt about her value and worth, and even about what clothing she would choose to wear as a result of internalized racism.

Well, I mean, for many years I had low self-esteem, I think I doubted my value and my worth. I mean you know, you would even think, 'well I can't wear that, that's too bright, I can't wear those colors', - so you had all of that, all those messages. (Earlene 1)

Lastly, Lauren exemplifies that she has continued her struggle with her sense of self and confidence about her appearance even in the midst of her liberation journey. In her first interview, she spoke about not having mirrors in her house because she doesn't like to look at herself.

So yeah, I really just didn't have a great sense of like myself at all, and like – I mean that's something that I still sort of struggle with, like I don't have – like with the exception of the one that's nailed to the wall, I don't have mirrors in my house. And I don't like to look at myself. I still have never really gotten over (laughter) that, which is unfortunate. (Lauren 1)

Again, this is an example of the participants continuing to struggle with the manifestations of internalized racism even in the midst of their liberation journey.

### Caused Separation from other Blacks/Black Community and Family

In the previous section, participants noted that one of the main manifestations of internalized racism was that they sought to separate themselves from other African Americans and Blacks. Over half of the participants spoke about feeling a disconnection from other Black people as a consequence of that and other manifestations of internalized racism. Some of them specifically noted that internalized racism caused separation from their own Black and African American family members. Lauren's story succinctly

exemplifies this theme by showing the ways in which her relationship with her family, as well as her social relationships were affected by her patterns of internalized racism. She first explains that as a result of thinking black people were bad or not wanting to be like black people, she emotionally separated her from her family. Now, she finds that her family has continued to believe that she has those feelings and she finds she does not have a strong connection with them.

I know, at least as a kid, my sort of not wanting to be like, or thinking that black people were bad, black people didn't have this sort of - these stories to tell that I didn't [want to hear]. I really now sort of look back on that and really regret not sort of getting the stories from (my grandparents) about like what it was like for them growing up, and they grew up in farms. But also even now with my extended family, especially my mom's side of the family, - I think part of it is just the way the family always see you. They have this snapshot of you from whenever it was that they knew you the most, and then that's sort of who you are. And so it's really been like a roadblock with them feeling like - 'well, you know, if we sort of open up to you, you're gonna judge us or say we're doing this thing wrong or we're making these kinds of mistakes.' I think it's had a negative impact on my relationship with my family because they still have the sense that I've got a lot of sort of hatred for - not just for Black people, but Oklahoma and being from the south, and so on. (Lauren 1)

In addition to her family, Lauren has struggled to have strong relationships with other African Americans in social settings. She finds that most of her social circle are other racial groups and noted that she really only has professional connections with other African American women.

But I would say that it had a really negative impact on my relationship with other African Americans in like a social setting. Like I have a handful of like African American professional women friends. I don't know any - I couldn't even tell you now any African American men at all. I (Laughter) can't say a single one that I know - I'm trying to think - that wasn't like a coworker or something. I'm at sort of at the point where I'm used to it so it's not so much that it's this great like loss in my life, and I'm just sad. But I just feel - it's just very like glaring, - like when I defended my dissertation and I had all these pictures of the parties - I had a party for myself. And then when you look at the faces of the people (in the pictures) - and one, none of them are African American, and people notice that - but two, the people that I sent it out to, like even just looking at the list, - there's a



handful of women, and they're African American women, and they all have graduate degrees. (Lauren 1)

Lastly, Lauren notes the earlier manifestations of internalized racism to explain the ways that her social connections have been hindered, specifically with Black men.

So, I think that when I think about that, like when I think about like my social networks, that's a place where I think - when I think about it with myself, - it was me sort of hating on myself and black people at some point in my life, but I never completely let all of that go. And so it's been sort of a hindrance in my sort of developing like a really positive relationship with, especially men. (Lauren 1)

### Overworking/Working to Disprove Stereotypes Associated with Blacks

The last major theme, *Overworking/Working to Disprove Stereotypes Associated with Blacks* was mentioned by over half of the participants. Many of them told stories of constantly trying to measure up to an artificial expectation or feeling like they had to prove that they were more than the stereotypes that U.S. society holds about African Americans and Blacks. The stereotype might have been that blacks were lazy, or not intelligent, or sometimes it wasn't specified, but the participants felt that they needed to fight the stereotypes. Glenda gives an example of what might go through participants' minds while trying to overachieve to disprove the stereotypes.

..and this was where the internalized racism was really awry, because I understood that part of my job as a black woman was to prove to the world that black people are not all of the things that the stereotype said that we were. So the stereotype said that we're lazy - I had to work extra hard - still do. You know, stereotype said we're stupid - I had to get all good grades. You know, the stereotype said that we are subservient - I had to be a leader. So whatever the stereotype said, I knew that my role was to combat that stereotype and prove to the world. I mean I learned, you know, because of racism, you have to be better than white people, get up earlier, work harder, and prove that we are not what this society has said we are.(Glenda 1)

Additionally, Glenda and other participants stories included details of the detrimental effect of their constant need to prove produced. Here Glenda shows that in her attempt to prove she was better, produced the opposite effect by negatively affecting her grades.

So, I became super-Black, - the person who was going to prove, as internalized racism really commended that we do, I was gonna prove that not only could Black people get through seminary, but we could excel. And I did to my detriment... So I went from having a 4.0 to like a 3.0 or a 2.8 or something like that, because I couldn't do it - I just could not keep up the pressure of having to be all things to all people without killing myself. (Glenda 2)

Liza also spoke about feeling like she needed to prove to others that she was competent by working constantly and studying extra hard in school. While working on her Ph.D, she found herself struggling to prove that she was “better than other people” in order to fight off potential criticism. She notes how she never achieved for her own benefit.

That regardless of what I thought or felt about myself I had to put on my public face and be, not just competent and not just good enough, but better than other people, because I knew otherwise I would be put down, and I did not want that. So yeah, I guess I was conscious. I was conscious of it at San Francisco [in graduate school], overcompensating, studying extra hard for that superficial view from other. I was such a good student..., but never out of a desire for the self, it was to show other people and to keep them at a distance or to keep their criticism at a distance. (Liza 1)

Liza's struggle with disproving the stereotype was connected to her self-loathing and feeling like she “was the problem” and it continued through graduate school. Even now she at times finds herself still struggling with believing that she is “worthy.”

And I'm a little, I guess, ashamed to say it but I was almost 30 before I realized the problem wasn't only me and I was trying to compensate for the problem being me by, 'dammit, I'm gonna get a graduate degree'. I'll show you. I'm showing me, showing you. I'm showing the nuns, I'm showing my dad, I'm showing so many people that I was worthy, but still never believed it. And I'll tell you a secret, I've been here, this is my 18 year here, my first and only job, I can not read my teaching evaluations because even if there like 50 people in the class and 49 of

them are glowing, there's that one thing, that one criticism, that will tear me down. And that's so ridiculous but I can't do it. (chuckle) (Liza 1)

In this last example, Earlene talks about working to separate herself from the stereotypes that are attributed to Black people like speaking a particular way or laughing loudly.

During the interviews she referenced silencing herself and working to separate herself from others' perceptions of Black people.

I'd spend all my time at those kind settings trying to think, 'ok, how can I prove that I'm not what they think', you know. 'Ok, so I'm gonna really talk very carefully, so I don't talk black', and you know, 'I'm going to make sure I don't laugh loud, that I'm gonna try to come on time' and all that stuff, you know. (Earlene 2)

In contrast, though not a major theme, one particularly striking response came from two participants who said that internalized racism encouraged them to excel school and it spurred them to their academic careers they have today. This was striking to me because these participants' took the negative attitudes that they both held about their physical beauty as a result of internalized racism, and chose to route their energy to another part of their lives and excel academically. Earlene told the story of being called names and acknowledges though she was "ugly", she decided to re-route her energy to being smarter than everyone.

So, I had dark skin, I had short hair, I mean even when my hair - it's really short now, but even when my hair was straight, it wasn't that long flowing kinda hair. So, I guess I remember thinking I was kinda ugly. And I decided somewhere, either in middle school or early high school that I might be ugly, but I'd be smart. I remember making a conscious decision there's nothing I can do about being ugly, - you're dark, you got a big nose, because they made fun of my nose, you got this short kinky hair, which if you saw the pictures, it really was kinky. (laughter) And, um...I mean it wasn't well kept, but middle school is kinda middle school. And so, since I was ugly, couldn't do anything about all of those things, that's just my life, that's your lot, you're born with that. But I made what was probably a really good accommodation, like "ok then, I'll just be smarter than everybody." And that's what my goal became... So I think in some ways it propelled me. It was an energy I used, uh, to focus on academics and doing well

and being successful academically...in some ways it actually became an impetus to why I'm a college professor now. (Earlene 1)

Exemplified in an earlier quote, Lauren joined Earlene in refocusing some of the negative belief that she had about herself to doing well in school. Though the majority of examples participants shared about the impact of internalized racism were negative as show by the themes above, Earlene and Lauren shared a unique experience that seemed important to note.

### Starting the Process of Liberation

Participants in this study offered a textured understanding of internalized racism sharing perspectives about their definition of internalized racism, the ways that internalized racism manifests itself in their lives, and the ways that internalized racism has impacted their experiences. This exploration creates a grounding for the ways in which the participants define, experience and see liberation impacting their lives. As Jackson states, "The transition from one stage to another usually occurs when an individual recognizes that his or her current worldview is either illogical or contradicted by new experiences and/or information" (2001, p. 16). During interviews, participants were asked to reflect on experiences that began their trajectory towards liberation. Many confirmed Jackson's theory of a process of liberation beginning with a moment or perspective that contradicted their previous thinking. When asked the question, "What started you on your path to liberation?" most participants responded that it wasn't any one particular situation, but rather the combination of moments and the meaning that they made from those moments that ushered them into seeing themselves and their experiences differently. Earlene tells the story of an interaction with a young man at

church that was older than she was and had a different opinion of her than what she had heard from others.

I think that was the starting one because I really admired him. And he said two things, one had something to do with how I looked and I really thought he was nice looking. He was a college student and I was in high school, so that was like awesome, awesome. And then the other thing he said, to me was “what do you want to do when you grow up?” I guess. Something to that effect. At that time I wanted to be a nurse, it was like the 9th grade, 10th grade and he said, 'oh you can never be a nurse.' He said, 'Nurses have to take orders and you are not that kind of person,' and I took that information and went and did all this research and like in high school decided I wanted to be a social worker. So, I mean, he really had an impact on me. He will probably never know it, I mean. So, I mean he started me on the road, but I still had a lot, lot, lot more to go. (Earlene 2)

Earlene’s moment of cognitive dissonance was not focused on her racial identity, but even that contradiction allowed for a perspective shift that allowed her to name that as a starting point to her racial liberation. Glenda, too, told the story of an experience with family that gave her a broader perspective about what it meant to be black.

When I graduated from college, I (chuckle) – my graduation present was to go – my parents sent me to Los Angeles to spend two weeks with my mother’s first cousin, who was an AME Zion pastor. You know, African Methodist Episcopal Zion Church was the mother church of Blackness, founded because of white racism. And Cousin Dwight was a pastor in the AME Zion Church – his wife was the head of Head Start in Los Angeles. These were very educated gifted Black people who didn’t have children and had a lot of money. So they were wonderful, wonderful people. And so my folks sent me out there. And I don’t know how direct the message was, but it was fairly clear to me early on in that vacation – it could have been three weeks that I was there – that part of the role of this vacation graduation present was to sort of reacquaint Glenda with Blackness. And so I remember Dwight giving me this book called “Ely: Too Black, Too White,” something like that. And the first week we were there, they took me to San Francisco, and we stayed on the penthouse level of the Hyatt. And every morning, Dwight would crack open a bottle of Martell cognac and give me a \$50 bill. They took me all over the place. They took me to shows and just kinda reeducated me with the profound power of blackness - the dignity of what it means to be Black. I mean Dwight’s father taught at like Virginia University, some Black school in Virginia – now he’s a college professor from way back. So it was like I didn’t have to be ashamed of being Black because we were always people of great worth and dignity, and it was like, “Don’t believe those lies that you’ve been taught.” So that was sort of the beginning of my reeducation. (Glenda 1)

Glenda's reeducation at the hands of her family members offered a chance to contradict some of the racism and internalized racism that had surfaced during her college years, but she still continued to wrestle with internalized racism as shown by other quotes mentioned in the findings. Marisa told the story of having her liberatory process start with studying abroad in Latin America. After attending the predominately white alternative college, she found herself experiencing a contradiction to her own thoughts about her Blackness.

Yeah, in Latin America, you know, we studied Latin American history. And part of learning Latin American history at that place, in Latin America, was learning about like the suppression of native people, and the slavery of African people, in a way that I had never talked about in a school in the United States. And it just – something clicked where I'm like yeah, you know, it gave me a sense of pride. It gave me a sense of understanding something that I didn't know before. And it was at that point in Latin America that I stopped straightening my hair, and I was being immersed in that learning and that experience. So that's an example of like having access to new knowledge that gave me some understanding of myself, helped me to make a choice that I feel was liberating. (Marisa 3)

As a last example, Nicole told the story of attending a historically Black college as the contradiction that transitioned her perspective. After struggling so much with internalized racism during junior high and high school, she felt like the college she attended was insistent on its students having pride.

Man, I got so tired of hearing “strong Black woman,” I don't wanna hear those words again for a long time –they drill it into you. Not only that, but when you get to college, there's a required course you have to take called ADW – African Diaspora and the World, and it's two parts you gotta take – one semester, and then the second semester. And that [weekly] convocation thing, they make you do that through sophomore year, so they like drill that shit into you. But what happens is, young girls from like Birmingham or the country, or ones who have been jacked up in Canada, like me, who thought they couldn't do anything, or who were first generation college students, who had no examples of anybody doing nothing, who hated themselves. As soon as you step foot in that place, they like try to crack that shit out of you, and they did. Not only did they get that out of you, but they replaced it with something, which was pride. So it looks to other

people that, you know, we're conceited or whatever – and maybe there's some truth to that – but I think what it is more is that they really drilled into you that you could do whatever the hell you wanted to do, no matter what. And you were equal, if not superior, to everybody else, like nobody can say anything to you. (Nicole 1)

Though even after attending this historically black college and feeling the messages of pride “drilled” into her, Nicole still feels like she wrestles with some forms of internalized racism,

It definitely helped, being at [the historically black college] surrounded by women who were confident, and who were beautiful. You know, I wasn't attracted to black women until very recently. I don't know what happened, how that turned around. Because for me, there's a difference between saying like somebody is attractive, and then being attracted to them. I saw many beautiful Black women in my life, but I was never attracted to them. So it's clear that something shifted. I don't have as much baggage about my hair like I used to – that's like evidence that something shifted. (Nicole 2)

These few examples give evidence that Jackson's racial identity models theory that state that transition from stage to stage can be initiated by discordant events. In order to transition and understand to the liberation themes extracted from the interviews, it is important to first examine the way that participants define and understand the phenomenon of liberation.

## Liberation

### Definition of Liberation

Prior to the interviews most of the participants said they were not familiar with or comfortable calling their movement toward more consciousness internalized racism a journey of liberation. As terminology that is mostly used in social justice and black psychology circles, liberation might be considered jargon, which explains why very few participants used the word. Therefore, understanding how participants understood the

word, define it, and see it applying to their lives was important because it helped me understand the ways that participants understood their liberation journeys. During the interviews, I asked the participants to define internalized racism and most participants felt comfortable and had developed their own definition for that word. Most participants, when prompted to think about it in reference to internalized racism, had lots to say regarding their definition of liberation and how they saw it working out in their lives.

As with internalized racism, in addition to providing a definition of liberation when asked, some participants started first with metaphorical descriptors of their journey of liberation. Not all of the participants used metaphors to talk about their liberation journey, 7 of the 11, but the number was still higher than those who gave metaphors for internalized racism. The metaphors were vivid and vast, ranging from colorful images to static descriptions of how it feels to be on the journey. All offered a greater interpretation of the phenomenon of liberation in the lives of African American and Black women. The main themes drawn from the participants' transcripts is that the concept of liberation offers a sense of freedom or optimism allowing participants a sense of growth and depth of life, but at the same time existing as "rocky path" that includes struggle and frustration.

Glenda expresses that tough balance clearly when she gives the metaphor of liberation being a seed below the earth that is in the process of growing,

But kinda recognizing that – picture it this way – picture the seed underground doing all the stuff that God does with that seed, until it finally pushes it's little head out of the ground and then starts reaching towards the sun. It doesn't get to the place of breaking the ground without some struggle. But once the ground is broken, you know, the growth continues, but there are always issues. A leaf might get burnt one day, you know, the wind might blow it over. (Glenda 3)



She likens liberation to the work of that seed pushing its head out of the ground and reaching, but at the same time having to face difficult moments in the midst of the growth. Liza continues conversation of working to balance the good of liberation with the difficult struggle that is sometimes faced.

It's a rocky path and I guess I know at one level that it's a rocky path, but do I really know inside, that because its a rocky path it's gonna be hard. And I think sometimes, I think, that because it doesn't feel right, therefore, excuse the language, I've fucked up. (Liza 2)

Believing that the journey of liberation should feel good inside, Liza worries that the difficulty that she has faced in her journey means that she has done the journey wrong. In her process she says that she looks to achieve a sense of balance with the good and the difficult and works to be more attentive to seeking that balance, though it sometimes feels like she is often on a tightrope.

So I think it's being more deliberate and attentive to seeking that balance, even though I haven't found it. And balance is a dynamic thing. It's not static, so I know that what is balance one week will have to shift to be unbalanced. But willing to be on the tightrope with grace, that's it. (Liza 2)

In a distinctive metaphor, Tabitha continues her explanation of the struggle of trying to balance the good with the difficulty in a liberation process. She likens her experience with internalized racism and liberation with being in a swimming pool – comparing the the absence of liberation to the shallow end of the pool and a process of liberation being the deep end. She says,

It's like in a pool, not given the path of liberation, you're in the shallow end. The shallow end can be fun some days and every once in a while you've gotta stand up and if you stay in the shallow pool, standing up in there it's gonna get cold and you're gonna be icky and... And then you get to the deep end, some days it's like free floatin', if you know how to swim, really warm and comfortable. And some days you might just feel like you're drowning. (Tabitha 3)

Tabitha continues with her metaphor of the swimming pool to explain the vibrant color that enters a life experience when someone is on a liberation journey. She says,

But the deep end, there's something warm, and vivid about the color that is in the deep end of the pool versus the shallow end. (The shallow end) is just cold and fun to splash around in, but the color's not as deep, it's not as blue, it's just there...empty. So I think of liberation as the deep end. (Tabitha 3)

The goal of this investigation is to provide some insight on how this group of women define liberation and make meaning of it in their lives. Much like internalized racism, the research data takes a step toward differentiating between what the participants say liberation or a liberatory consciousness is, and the way that it is manifesting in their lives. Though the participants named feeling good about themselves and recognizing their inherent value as the number one way that they defined liberation, it will be shown in their examples of liberation, that many still seek that a consistent feeling of liberation in their own lives. Three main themes that appeared when participants were asked to give a definition for liberation: *Feeling good about self/recognizing inherent value, refuting racist concepts, and developing courage*. Interestingly, though not named as a definition, many participants also talked about liberation as an *ongoing evolutionary process*.

### Feeling Good About Self: Recognizing Inherent Value

Seven of the 11 participants defined liberation as feeling good about themselves and recognizing their inherent value. When compared to the definition of internalized racism from the participants, this more positive definition of liberation seems logical and necessary and clearly connected to having a psychology of liberation. The impact of internalized racism mostly created self-loathing and low self-esteem in the lives of the participants. It seems sensible that by developing a consciousness based more in

liberation, participants would seek ways in their process to regain a sense of self and that an outcome of that consciousness would be to feel their inherent value. Earlene, one of the participants who specifically stated that she did not use the word liberation, defined it as self-definition and talked about how she encourages her students to self define,

[I define it as] Knowing who I am. I always say that it's important to self define...that you define. And to me self-defining means you determine who you are and what you want to be, so that's my language. I don't use the language of liberation. I tell my students this, actually, to self define, so that's not only for myself. I said, 'do not allow the white oppressive system', so that's what I'm talking about, 'to define what it means to be a Black person.' (Earlene 1)

She continues to clarify what it means to self define by expounding on what it means to define for herself what is beautiful and that she doesn't wait for the media to define what that is.

And so feeling good about yourself, to me, translates into not letting the external manifestations of beauty or what's valuable, decide who you are. It just boils down to that. You are not going to see yourself reflected still in the media or whatever, but, so what? I mean, they don't define what is beautiful for me. They don't define what is valuable for me. And, in fact, much of what they define is valuable in the media, per se, I'm not, I'm not into that, about letting them define me. So I think for me, recognizing my inherent worth and value was really important. (Earlene 2)

For Liza, the definition of liberation also rests with realizing one's self-worth and recognizing that worth is not based on a stereotype. She gives the example that in her writing, one of the places where she has a consciousness of liberation, she feels she is more self-possessed and able to show others that there are ways out an internalized consciousness,

I mean, the bars, the fetters, the anchor, I guess it's also realizing one's self worth is not based on any stereotype and it certainly isn't based on hatred. Beyond that, I think it's once one-, once I can say I'm more self possessed I can be more vocal, and maybe that's part of what the writing is too, sharing my story with others to see that there are perhaps ways out. (Liza 2)

Marisa also explained that liberation for her would mean being in a “clear and empowered” place in her life which would bring a feeling of being at ease for her.

Honestly, I feel like liberation would be a feeling of being at ease. And clear and empowered and who I am and what I do and think about, and I don't know that I feel that all the time, I feel like that's something I aspire to. I feel a profound sense of, can I just feel comfortable in this world? Can I just belong? Can I just exhale? Liberation for me would mean that and on some level an emotional liberation of being clear about who I am, what I've chosen, how I've made meaning and feel affirmed in that, to feel like, 'yeah this is right, this makes sense' - sometimes I feel there's so many competing ideas and competing discourses and past lives that interfere or that are present, so it's hard to really feel whole and grounded and clear, so for me I think liberation would be that. (Marisa 2)

In seeking that place of “ease”, Marisa acknowledges that she does not always exist there. In her liberation, she seeks a grounded and clear feeling that she thinks comes with feeling consistently inherently good about who she is, what she thinks about and what she does. To define liberation, Nicole joins Marisa in seeking that “sense of comfort with one's self or contentment” (Nicole 3) or “a solid sense of self” (Nicole 3) for herself. Paula believes that her achievement of a solid sense of self will be a benefit for others as well as herself. She says “once (one) has a solid sense of self, one is able to bring your whole - all our selves, all of our strengths, all of our capabilities to the floor, not only for us, but for the world, right? (Paula 3) Paula believes that achieving that solid sense of self benefits the world because “it increases our sense of agency because it diminishes our sense of victimization. The more we feel victimized, the less able we are to do anything.” (Paula 2) Lauren adds to the theme by expressing her belief that feeling good about herself includes feeling good about the way she looks,

I think liberation from internalized racism might be me feeling better about myself - just in general. But also I think, about the way that I look - I think we talked a little bit about that the last time - that I think without being paranoid

about (laughter) what my hair looks like or whatever my legs look like. (Lauren 2)

To summarize the first theme of recognizing an inherent value or feeling good about self, Stephanie acknowledges that this definition of liberation is inherently a process that can only be accomplished by the individual. She says,

I wanna be accepted for my whole being, not just pieces and parts. And so for me, liberation is an internalized process in itself. No one can liberate you - you can only liberate yourself. Like I'm never gonna walk through this earth and expect everyone to like me, accept me, love me, affirm me, you know, parts or my whole being. Liberation is about finding that divine within and finding that wholeness within yourself and being comfortable with that on a daily basis. We look to others to affirm us and give us meaning, and it's just like this vicious cycle. So we should be on the journey because I think ultimately it's the only way as individuals we will find peace and happiness. (Stephanie 3)

Inherently believing in one's own value and feeling good about oneself connects naturally to the next two themes that participants named when defining liberation. Each garnered half of the participants' definitions and both seem to build from the foundational theme of believing in one's own inherent value. Participants defined as refuting racist concepts, and developing courage as two additional ways that they defined liberation.

#### Developing Courage/Using Your Voice

Audre Lorde, a African American, writer, educator, and poet, exemplified the courage that exists in liberation for some of the participants. Liza gives an example of how she defines the courage that exists in liberation through what she thinks Audre Lorde would say in a liberatory moment.

I'm thinking Audre Lorde would say, 'you get your cracker ass off my-', it's like come on! Wake up! Something more like that. To be present in mind and not take any crap, and to show someone else you will not take crap and so your attempts to strike fear ain't gonna work here, so you better stop.

Interviewer: So liberation means courage?

Liza : Yeah it does. To act when you otherwise would rather hide in the closet. Woo! That Audre Lorde image and what I said. I'm headed to that.

Interviewer: What does she signify to you?

Liza: (pause) Someone with courage. And i guess I think, courage doesn't mean that you're not afraid, but you don't let the fear hold you back. (Liza 2)

Glenda agrees with the example of Audre Lorde as a model of courage and refusing to be silent. She gives her own example of how she's embraced the words of Audre Lorde to support her liberation.

I think it's – Audre Lorde talked about the transformation of silence into language and action, and I think that's liberatory. So I'm not saying that I won't be silent again in the future, but every time I can claim my voice and how I feel about something and act on that, that's liberatory. (Glenda 3)

Tabitha picks up on the theme of feeling liberated by courageously using her voice. During the interviews, she told the story of a situation of an upper level manager saying something to her at work that was demeaning. She reflects in the quote below that during another time in her life, she might not have been able to go to this person and speak up, but because she felt more in her liberation, she was able to speak up.

I can see that as a growth point. My liberation wouldn't allow me to rest and not say something to her. My spirit of liberation, my process of liberation would not allow me to, to just let that happen. And, there was no fear. I just knock on her door and said, 'I've gotta, I want to talk to you.' That's a process of liberation. There would have been a time that I would never have been able to do that. It may have come up in my mind, and I would have said, 'heck no.' (Tabitha 3)

### Noticing and Refuting Racist Concepts

The example that Tabitha gives above of challenging her coworker flows smoothly into the last major theme that participants cited as a definition of liberation.

Half of the participants either specifically named or gave examples of refuting internal

and external racist concepts that exist in a racist culture as part of their definition of liberation. Glenda discussed her process of noticing and naming the distortions that she had within, then confronting those as part of her journey to liberation.

Liberation is recognizing the internalized oppression as well as the externalized oppression. And recognizing the need to heal from that, and that the healing had to do with my mind. I'm talking about how I was consciously raised to hate myself as a black person. And so, you know, it's what - give me a minute - I might not pull it out - the miseducation of the Negro - what was his name?

Interviewer: Carter G. Woodson.

Glenda: Yes. It was about the reeducation of the black person. So that's the – it is recognizing where the distortions were within me, and beyond me, and then developing the courage, as well as the tools, to confront that. (Glenda 2)

Nicole agrees, though she believes that the process of undoing or relearning is based in really understanding how a system of racism might show up in a society and through that understanding, deciding not to believe in its messages.

I think like the way I talk about [liberation]...I called it undoing all this shit. It means to be aware of racism, how insidious it is, all the ways that it manifests itself and people don't realize. Not buying into it, refusing to buy into it. (Nicole 2)

Earlene draws a connection to the importance of the individual recognizing their value and their worth in the midst of refuting the existing system.

The refuting of racist concepts that you have internalized and the developing sense of your value and worth as a Black person is all about refuting the existing oppressive structure and saying, 'I'm not gonna let you define me that way. (Earlene 3)

As easy as Earlene makes it sound, Liza acknowledges that the resisting or refuting of the messages from a racist society potentially is a two step process for her that involves both her intellect and her feelings.

Well, the simplest way to begin is just reversing what I said before. Being able to shoot down or disregard or to put to bed the acceptance of the stereotypes and generalizations and just the ideas that are clearly, that I can see up here (pointing

to her head), are wrong that are based on ignorance and not having there be the immediate gut reaction where they're brought right in here (pointing to her heart). (Liza 1)

Lastly, Marisa adds complexity to the resisting or refuting racist concepts part of the definition. For her, the resisting goes beyond negating the messages that she has received and grows to acknowledging that for her being Black goes beyond the race descriptor and racism that always seems to follow Black people. She says,

That's another part of liberation for me. Racism doesn't have to define me. There's cultural pieces that are really important. You know, one of the things that I worked on when I first came to my graduate program was this idea that, - why do African Americans always gotta be seen as a race? We have a culture. We have culture - you know, we have a culture, we have ethics, we have a way of being in the world. Those things are really important to preserve and to pass down. So I feel like - and what we talked about last time, a lot of these things we need to unpack, like what we assume to be our culture, right?

Interviewer: Right.

Marisa: But I think there's something to the fact of learning that we have a culture or we could build a culture, or that we could create some sense of peoplehood, right? I think that's really an important part of the liberation. (Marisa 2)

For Marisa, acknowledging the cultural aspects of Blackness can move people beyond feelings of internalized racism and along the process of liberation.

In addition to these ways of defining liberation, many of the participants noted specifically that the process of liberation, was not one that happened overnight or that they felt would ever be complete for them.

### Ongoing Evolutionary Process

It seems important to note here that though not a theme that defined liberation, participants described liberation as a circular and ongoing evolutionary process. This



corresponds to Tatum's (1997) assessment of Cross' and Jackson's racial identity development models reviewed in her book, *Why are all the Black kids sitting together in the Cafeteria*. She says, "Unraveling and re-weaving the identity strands of our experience is a never ending task in a society where important dimensions of our lives are shaped by the simultaneous forces of subordination and domination. We continue to be works in process for a lifetime" (p. 88). While not a definition, the theme does help with the comprehension of what the liberatory process might look like in the racial identity development models. Earlene discusses this in her first interview then expands her thoughts during interview number 3.

When I got to that point, when I decided that, when I started working towards...it's probably been a long evolutionary process, it's not something that I got up tomorrow, yesterday, right? 'I'm gonna be liberated.' I think it's been an ongoing process. (Earlene 1)

In interview number three, when making meaning of her experience of internalized racism and liberation, Earlene continues noting that there is no easy way or overnight moment that causes liberation, but rather a series of events. This, too, illuminates and confirms the ways that Jackson talks about a developmental process in his theory.

Well, as with any type of liberation, it's a process. In other words, you can't say, 'Oh, I remember on July 2, 1985 this happened and now I'm liberated.' It was really an evolutionary process, in other words, you know one day you get up and this happens and after you think, 'well it's ok to be-', you know I've talked about color, because color for an African American woman and hair, those are the two things, so you begin to think it's ok to be to do dark, it's ok to have this kind of hair, it's ok to have these features, it's ok to be who you are, but it didn't happen all at once, and it happened, um, slowly, I mean this thing would happen, and that thing would happen, and then you would add it up, you know. (Earlene 3)

Marisa continues describing the cyclical mechanism of liberation by noting the ways in which an individual might always be learning in their liberation journey. She draws

specific attention to the possibility that there is maybe no end to the experience of liberation.

I don't know, it's definitely a process, I don't know if there's an end point, and I feel like it's any other kind of social justice work - social justice education, there's process and then a certain set of knowledge that you can have to call yourself a social justice educator, but there's always going to be new ideas and new ways of thinking about it that complicate, like how you've thought of it all that time. So I kinda feel the same way about Black liberation, it's going to be process with no real clear end point. (Marisa 2)

Paula and Liza offer an additional dimension to the cyclical nature of liberation by noting that there is indeed struggle in the midst of a liberation journey. Paula, who does look toward an end point to the process, calls on the images and language of the struggles of the 1960's,

Well, you know, our language in the - 60s was that you're in a struggle, right? So siempre la lucha – you're always in this battle toward a final point of liberation that doesn't come in any kind of perfect complete way. But that you're always in that struggle, and you have a sense of what a completely liberated world would look like, what an equitable or just world would look like. So I think in the process - but I think you're always in that struggle, you're actively engaged in a struggle that looks toward liberation and justice. (Paula 2)

And Liza notes in her process that sometimes for her it feels like she makes forward movements in her thinking then it feels like her liberation progress reverses. Currently in her life, she feels like she has been continuing to “step forward”.

It's like one step forward, two steps back sometimes. Or two steps forward and no step back, but over the last - like the time since I've been on this campus I've been [moving forward] ok. (Liza 3)

### Examples of Liberation in Participants Lives

Exploring the examples that participants shared about their manifestations of liberation provide texture and clarity to the stages of resistance and redefinition as

mentioned in Jackson's racial identity development model. (Jackson, 2001) The participants spoke about having confidence and feeling good about themselves as a clear example of the ways that manifestations or behaviors of liberation showed up in their lives. They also talked about the ways in which self-actualization or living a more authentic life encouraged them to behave in more liberated ways. This theme offers a clearer answer to the research question by describing a portion of what African American and Black women's experience is like as they begin to have a clearer consciousness and richer understanding of the impact of internalized racism on their lives. When describing manifestations of liberation in their lives, the participants focused on three main themes: *Having confidence and comfort/feeling good about themselves; Claiming their voice/self advocacy; and living a more authentic life.*

#### Having Confidence and Comfort / Feeling Good About Themselves

In her interviews, Debra at times spoke of the racism that occurs at her workplace. During her second interview which was focused primarily on liberation, she was able to describe the confidence she has to challenge the tough situations at work,

There's been some sort of oppression, whether it be the boss that hired me or the media boss for people who have done most of the work. There has always been some sort of jealousy or envy or hatred in my work regarding race and how those things mix, but having the understanding that I can be tough but I can still make it and for me that's liberation. (Debra 2)

Earlene talked about the theme of confidence and comfort in a different way by stating that she now doesn't feel she has to prove anything. She is able to be in the world in a more confident way without feeling like she has to apologize.

When I see someone who I think is truly on the road to self actualization, you notice I said, on the road, because I don't think one ever becomes self actualized, I

think there's a comfort within your own skin. There's a 'this is me, whatever.' Um, there's not this vulnerable, insecure, trying to prove - this is me. And with that, then you can be who you are, you know. I'm not going to-, you know if I wanna laugh loud, that's fine because I like to laugh loud, not because I'm Black, it's because I like to laugh loud. There are people who laugh loud who are not Black. And there are Black people that laugh really quiet for whatever reason, I mean, that's just them, but that's not me. And I don't have to change my laughter to refute a stereotype, nor do I have to laugh out loud because I believe a stereotype. I really just like laughing loud. That's just me. (Earlene 3)

Liza says her confidence manifests more as self-respect and the recognition that she offers the world as much as anyone else. She is able to see the ways in which liberation manifest because she has been able to do away with old messages.

Yeah, I don't know if the word proud is the right word. It's more an understanding that I have as much to offer as anyone else. That I am as valuable as anyone else. That what I have to say is important just as much as what you or anyone else has to say and for all of us to be valued, we need to listen to each other. And I want to do that and I am doing that. That's part of it. Standing taller. Looking people in the eye, rather than on the ground. Just that, I mean, that's from-, this tall. Not, not only being away of old habits and telling myself not to do them, but they go. They go. They've gone past their life expectancy or their usefulness. (Liza 2)

She goes on explaining the mechanisms she uses to usher in the experience and expression of confidence and comfort that she now feels. She explains that through gentleness with herself, self-care and moments of self-talk, she is able to notice the places where she feels more confident.

Compassionate, more that, um, that I force myself to look in the mirror. That I considered bad hair and ugliness, um, stop it, just stop. Just trying to establish a friendlier relationship with myself, seeing as how this is who I've been for just about almost half a century. This is all I got! So, might as well be on friendly terms and realizing for my full health I do need to take care of myself and that taking care of myself is a worthwhile thing to do. And looking at this because this is a form of taking care of myself and trying not to let it be completely, not just pushed on the backburner, but completely off the stove. I guess it's reprioritizing. Yeah, and a part of that is not just because of becoming more aware of, or being more on the path to liberation, (Liza 2)

For Stephanie, the confidence came in the form of recognizing that she didn't have to please people any longer and by choosing not to, she was saving herself from a life of misery.

So for me, it was kind of like, well, I already understood that context, I already had that context, I already knew that there were gonna be people who didn't like me for some reason, so why am I trying to please everybody? Why am I trying to please people? And so you know, it's part of the beginning - it's like that first layer of like beginning to reject those messages and all those external messages and saying, you know what, I am who I am, and I'm just gonna have to accept myself for who I am or I'm just gonna be miserable for the rest of my life. (Stephanie 2)

Both Tabitha and Nicole have worked to avoid that feeling of misery and their liberation process has brought a feeling of completeness and clarity.

I was just going to say in liberation it just feels different. I feel like - I used to worry about, 'oh, I have this big giant hole in me.' I feel like a solid being. It's like dig into me and you're gonna see solid. Solid being that knows her thoughts and because she's thoughtful and connected and clear-er. Not, I don't think as clear all the time as I could be or that is possible for me, but really solid and yeah, tree stump. (Tabitha 2)

Yeah, I feel much more solid sense of self – it feels freer. It's not like rock-solid, like I can't change, but it's content as opposed to insecure or not there at all. For so long, it seemed like there was no like real sense of self. (Nicole 3)

### Claiming Their Voice/Self-Advocacy

Participants' liberation manifested through the ways that they chose to advocate for themselves and speak up more, as well. Half of the participants told stories and gave examples of the ways in which they were now better able to speak up for themselves and "claim their own voice" Glenda, again refers to Audre Lorde's inspiration for Glenda to continue using her voice and not letting incidents of racism or exclusion go by in her position as congregational leader.

And just to claim my own voice and feelings about that, and not simply let another incident go by in silence. I think it's - Audre Lorde talked about the transformation of silence into language and action, and I think that's liberatory. So I'm not saying that I won't be silent again in the future, but every time I can claim my voice and how I feel about something and act on that, that's liberatory. (Glenda 3)

She continues that her ability to use her voice was useful when confronting someone about their verbal abuse. She believes that her ability to self advocate and speak up allowed her to act differently in her relationships be seen as someone who is liberated as opposed to subordinant.

Well, I mean the example that I think of is, you know, when I refused to allow somebody to verbally abuse me, because I was strong enough in my liberated self to say I don't deserve this. And that actually - me being able to claim me changed the dynamic in the relationship with that person. So I do think that the more I can, as an individual African American, be liberated and show my liberated self, the more people are gonna have to deal with somebody who's liberated, rather than somebody who is oppressed. And I think that dynamic - the quality changes. (Glenda 3)

Liza believes that in her process of liberation she has actually had to learn how to use her voice and that her writing has assisted with her self advocacy. She tells the story of being fearful of submitting her writing before, but now because of writing and her process of liberation, she is able to take risks and not look back.

I think what's different or what's good is that I speak up. A few years ago when I wanted to speak up, um I felt that I didn't really know how. Now I may feel I don't know how, it's not stopping me. So maybe that's a change? That I'm writing. That I've even, uh, I reach a point where I feel least afraid so I'll put a manuscript in the mail, and not go immediately back to the post office and asking for it back, which has happened. But I, once you mail it, you know it's mailed. (Liza 2)

### Living a More Authentic Life

The last major theme that was noted among participant responses was their ability to live a more authentic life in their process of liberation. Again, half of the participants gave examples of ways in which they expressed themselves with more authenticity and that it often allowed for them to connect with people on a deeper level. Marisa notes that the authenticity allows her to express herself in an honest and truthful way.

And it's partly meeting people where they're at, and it's also partly being real about who you are, you know, like standing in a certain integrity. (Marisa 3)

Paula offers an image to express the way that she sees herself living a more authentic life in liberation. She says that her authenticity expands beyond being authentic about race, but that it stretches to her other identities as well. She says she is able to give up trying to construct a certain image, but rather embrace the gifts she has.

So I think a liberation from internalized racism looks like a full flowering. It's not just necessarily around race, - I'm Black and I'm proud,- but also around all of the gifts, right? So that you're not so busy trying to control, hold down, forget about, you know, wrestle with all of those issues, and you can just go ahead and do it. (Paula 2)

As a last example, Stephanie, who worried about the way that she expressed herself, gives the example that authenticity means she has realized that she doesn't have to be perfect or "proper". She acknowledges that her way of doing things doesn't lessen what she is able to bring to her workplace.

And I realize now that, again, being my most authentic self also means the way I speak. And that I'm not gonna always use the exact right word, or the proper diction, or not gonna say things exactly the way somebody else would say them. And that's okay, that's just gonna have to be acceptable for me. You know, that doesn't lessen my intellect. It doesn't lessen my ability to communicate. (Stephanie 2)

## Consequences/Outcomes of Liberation

To bring additional meaning to the experience of liberation in the participants' lives, I asked them about what changes they noticed in their lives as a result of their process of liberation. The themes in this section offer insight into the ways the participants see their lives being impacted by their attempt to embrace a process of liberation and have more consciousness of internalized racism. Again, these themes directly answer the research question by providing information and descriptions of the participants' experience with liberation. The participants clearly name specific situations, ways of thinking, and perceptions of other ethnic groups as outcomes of a liberated perspective. Some of the outcomes mirror and can be seen as connected to the manifestations of liberation, and others are clear result of challenging manifestations of internalized racism. When describing the consequences of liberation in their lives, the participants focused on four main themes: *Living more boldly/able to be productive;* *More relationships with people of color;* *Ability to hear others' pain/more compassion;* *Changed perspectives about white people*

### Living More Boldly/Able to be Productive

A majority of the participants gave examples of ways that they are able to act more boldly in their everyday lives. Liza cites that she is better able to respond to her "work in the world."

I don't have to publish everything, but I do need to understand. But I'm also seeing that, in answer to your question, that in this practice, I realize that that I will be better able to do my daily work in the world, that I will understand what's coming at me better and would be able to respond to it or respond to it both in terms of actions, but also how I feel internally, that so much isn't taken inside as demeaning or degrading or something like that. (Liza 3)



She continues, referencing an earlier quote, that because she put “the bars” down, she is able to have constructive frame of thinking.

And really being compassionate to that voice that I think will always be there, but seeing if there's this other way, kind of improving, another way of being in conversation that doesn't keep these bars here. Oh, the bars, I've put down. They're over there. And that, when that voice pops up, like 'I think it would be a good idea to do this project or maybe work with someone on a conference or let's get a group of people together to do this,' and then that voice says, 'well, you have no way to do that' or 'that's a stupid idea.' Well you might be right but we're gonna do it anyway. That kind of thing. Because I'm still, when I hear that voice, I'm stuck. I'm frozen. Or I get to that in fits and starts, not in a purposeful-, no purpose is there, it's more in a positive frame thinking 'I can do it and it's worth doing.' It's more thinking, 'I might be able to do it and it might be worth doing.' You know. All of that. (Liza 2)

She also notes that because she has less fear she is able to engage more intensely in her relationships.

But to engage deeply and honestly with someone and I'm more willing to do that than I've ever been in my life and I think it's partly because some of the fear is a little bit lesser....some of the time.. (Liza 2)

Another participant, Tabitha revealed that she no longer carries the worry about how others perceive her. She therefore is able to freely express herself more liberally in situations which she encounters.

And that is that liberated piece of me that sort of is like, right all the stuff that I'm carrying in my head about stuff, I do a better job on a daily basis, sometimes better than others, of walking into places and not thinking folks are thinking anything about me. Not caring, I'm like, you know I'm walking in Black, but that don't mean jack, you don't know me. And so, I have had these thoughts of: I can do this, I can put it down. I can walk into places and not care about what people think of me. And that's the internalized... I have put down enough of internalized racism to walk my life more freely. (Tabitha 3)

Paula noted that her liberation has offered her a sense of intention in her life, and she no longer carries a burden of being a woman of color.

If I think about my life, it's that kind of – you know, my work is focused on creating a just and equitable society. So I think it's given me a clear sense of

purpose in life, and a certain amount of ease and joy. I mean it's better to feel good about yourself than to be constantly worrying about, "Am I too this? Or am I not enough that?" One of my friends says, you know, that's what it's like being a woman of color – you're always too much of this and too little of that. And so I think it gets you out of that conundrum, you know. (Paula 2)

Lastly, Stephanie acknowledges her acceptance that she is not perfect. She no longer chooses to obsess about her errors, therefore, she is a more creative and proficient professional.

So now I don't think – I'm not in my head so much, you know, I just am, I just respond, I just react. And if I make a mistake, I own the mistake, or I apologize for the mistake, and I move on. You know, I name it, claim it, and go on with my day, and I don't obsess about it anymore. Where when I was, I think, less liberated and more internalized, it would be like that incident or situation would like destroy me for the day. And it would make me question, again, whether I should be here, am I good enough, you know, am I smart enough? Do people respect me, do people like me, do people care, blah, blah, blah. I have all those conversations in my head. Meanwhile, people aren't thinking about me, they're thinking about their own stupid stuff all day too. But it just made me a less productive professional, a less productive me. (Stephanie 2)

### Increased Self-Care

Participants also noted that they began to see themselves and their physical health as important. Glenda stated, "It makes me feel like I wanna care for this flesh that I have been diminishing because of internalized issues, and so I can live long and prosper" (Glenda 2). Liza joined her with this thought, "I don't want to be or keep on being a party to my own diminishment" (Liza 3). Paula expanded the thought by acknowledging that greater self care reduces her sense of victimization.

I mean that's, you know – get it all in the picture, and then it's – I think it's also – I guess you're helping me get the language – it increases our sense of agency because it diminishes our sense of victimization. The more we feel victimized, the less able we are to do anything. (Paula 2)

Liza recognizes that her relationship with herself is really all she has and has learned that her self-care should be a priority in her life.

Compassionate, more that, um, that I force myself to look in the mirror. That I considered bad hair and ugliness, um, stop it, just stop. Just trying to establish a friendlier relationship with myself, seeing as how this is who I've been for just about almost half a century. This is all I got! So, might as well be on friendly terms and realizing for my full health I do need to take care of myself and that taking care of myself is a worthwhile thing to do. And looking at this because this is a form of taking care of myself and trying not to let it be completely, not just pushed on the backburner, but completely off the stove. I guess it's reprioritizing. Yeah, and a part of that is not just because of becoming more aware of, or being more on the path to liberation, (Liza 2)

### Deeper Relationships with People of Color

This next theme is in direct opposition to the theme choosing to be separate from the Black community, cited as a manifestation of internalized racism by the participants. According to Glenda, part of her process of liberation has been expanding her relationship to other Black people, “In fact I think part of my own journey of liberation has been expanding my circle of black friends and other friends of color” (Glenda 2). Marisa also has noted that she has begun appreciating the Black people in her life and expanding her connections to the Black community.

There's something that's definitely happened to me in the process of affirming like, black people are beautiful, black people are smart, black people are knowledgeable, we have access to all kinds of things that we don't even know we know, and we need to be knowing what our knowledge is, and there's a whole lot of us black people (Marisa 2).

Paula, who struggled early with her relationships in a Black community now, at 65, feels more connected.

Yes. I'm just trying to think about that a little more in-depth. Yeah, feeling good about myself, not just better, but good. Feeling a part of a community, feeling part of the black community – probably more the community of color than the black community, but both. (Paula 2)

### Ability to Hear Others' Pain/More Compassion

A surprising finding was that a majority of the participants used the word “compassion” to express their interactions with themselves and others in their process of liberation. Earlene noted that she offered kindness to other African Americans who are attempting to exist in the same systemic racism that she is.

Not only is that [grace] true for you, but you extend it to others. See other African Americans and you see something that they're doing and you are able to think, no matter what they do that it's ok because you've allowed yourself to be ok and so whether they are loud or whether are something stereotypic, I mean, I now can in a sense when I say grace I can think, well, look, they're just trying to survive like me. They're in the same oppressive system that I am and that they've learned tools that I might not find acceptable, that I may be uncomfortable with or that I may even disagree with, but I do know that they're trying to make it in this oppressive system. So as I begin to feel more comfortable with me, I was able to hear other people's pain and relate to them better. (Earlene 2)

Nicole feels that her experience of oppression has broadened her ability for compassion and empathy.

I think I imagine that the influence has been more about having had the experience of being oppressed, and like through that, getting some empathy and understanding. Like it's something like far more basic, like spiritually basic, like fundamental goodness and compassion and love. And maybe my experience of being oppressed has like increased my capacity to be compassionate, empathetic, of service, spiritual, self-aware. And those are the things that will like persist. (Nicole 3)

In addition to participants having more compassion in their relationships to others, some participants spoke about a more compassionate relationship with themselves. Liza, who spoke of her internalized racism and liberation as two different voices, has more compassion toward herself and has developed a practice of being in conversation about the internalized behaviors she has taken in,

So, more of a give and take. I guess just beginning with the two voices, [internalized racism and liberation] recognizing that this voice will never go away

and allowing it to have a seat at the table or with the other, but compassionately realizing or saying to it, 'you really don't need to do this.' Why is this voice here? Why is the internalized racism here, partly? I mean how much of it is kind of like a survival mechanism and do I really need you the way that you're operating? You may have achieved something in the past, but I don't think you're doing it now. I think you're actually holding things up. And somehow, letting it be there, but also not letting it dominate. But how do I do that? But I guess beginning, being compassionate to everything and not being so self (pause), self-loathing, self-, anything that you can think of, denying, self-, help me, help me, help me, say something. Anything. Like just a prompt, anything. (Liza 2)

Stephanie agrees that in a process of liberation she is able to be more lenient during the moments when internalized racism resurfaces.

I think I'm just much more forgiving of myself. I'm forgiving of myself when I have internalized racism and I regress. Like oh, you know, here's a slipup, there's – you know, I try my best to see it coming, or try to like really identify it as it's coming. But sometimes you miss – sometimes, you know, you don't realize it. (Stephanie 2)

### Changed Perspectives about White People

Some participants were able to recognize that their perceptions of and relationships with White people changed after they began their process of liberation.

Marisa who cites that one way her manifestation of internalized racism manifested was through the power that she gave to White people. She now recognizes that White people also have to struggle with racism, too, and doesn't expend the same energy being angry being angry at racism.

Oh, yeah, definitely, like I don't take – I think I've gotten to a place where I don't get upset with racism in a way I would have in the past. Because now I'm just like, White people are crazy, they need to get their stuff together, there's nothing in the culture that has allowed them to do anything different, so why spend my energy being mad? (Marisa 2)

Marisa continues,

And I feel like part of my liberation has been like internalizing that idea of like yeah, White – this society is racist, most White people are racist, they don't necessarily know they're racist. I can extend some compassion because they

can't help it, because there's nothing major that's really transformed the society. It's not about them personally – it's not necessarily conscious. They don't really know better. They don't have any tools until you bring them the tools. And then some of them are gonna take it on, and some of them are not, so I'm gonna be analyzing some more. So that's been really liberating. (Marisa 3)

Stephanie finds herself much more selective about the White people she chooses to have close relationships with in her life.

But now it's like very intentional for me, like I do not have friends who are White unless they are – like I'm not hanging out with you, like we're not gonna have coffee, we're not chillin' – like I will collegially, like on campus, like, "Let's go to coffee, Stacy Miller, you know, and shoot the breeze." No problem. But like I ain't going to your house after work, we're not hanging out, no. But I'm not hanging out with you unless you're doing the work because it just – And that's, to me, part of my liberation, like I can't be around people who don't get it. Then that's gonna mean I can't be authentic, and then I've regressed. Even if it's just an hour or two, I've regressed – can't do it – can't regress for that long – like intentionally. Like I might regress accidentally, but I can't intentionally put myself in a situation where I'm gonna be uncomfortable for an extended period of time, and I'm gonna be feeling like I can't be myself. (Stephanie 2)

### Factors Supporting Participants in Their Journey

In addition to the themes about the definition and dynamics of liberation, themes also surfaced about how participants are able to maintain their process of liberation in a racist society. During the interviews, participants seemed to highlight a two significant themes such as the *impact of education on participants' process of liberation* and the *importance of support* while in the process.

#### Impact of Education on Participants' Process of Liberation

As stated earlier, the participant sample included in the study is highly educated including three participants with terminal degrees and all eleven having graduated with a four-year college degrees. Interestingly, a majority of the participants spoke about the

impact that education that included information about a system of oppression had on their analysis of internalized racism and their moving forward in their liberatory process.

Earlene states, “I think it increases your - because you read, you discuss, you interact - it increases your level of consciousness. So, I would agree with that. But, I think that the ability to reflect, stop, check, really, um, question is available to anyone.” (Earlene 3)

Earlene’s thinking about the importance of reading, reflecting and questioning the system of oppression was a repetitive theme mentioned by the participants. She continues by mentioning the ways in which reading black authors helped her clarify that the system of racism did not define her,

... but I think to get through the process (of gaining a greater consciousness of internalized racism) you have to work hard and you have to study. And by studying I mean, you know you do your reading... whether it’s someone like Maya Angelou or it might have been other African American writers. There was a time period where I read everything that James Baldwin wrote and so you read these and you begin to think, 'I don't have to allow an oppressive system to define me.' (Earlene 2)

Other participants also mentioned that reading Black authors or liberation theorists such as Memmi and Fanon assisted in their understanding of the system of oppression.

Glenda, spoke rather about a course she took as part of her seminary study that gave her a greater understanding and analysis that moved her in the direction of liberation.

It was a course I took - my first year of seminary, I had this African American male supervisor for my Field Ed, named Mike Cooper. But to be able to have a supervisor who looked like me was exceedingly helpful. And there was a couple who were members of his church. Bob Mathis was the head of youth ministry in one of the predecessor bodies of my current denomination, and his wife, Dorothy Mathis, was a woman who taught group dynamics and anti-racism, and she was really the first white person that I met who understood and taught about the structural dynamics of racism. So I took a course from Dorothy my second year in group dynamics and anti-racism. So that - I mean it was this course that helped me to begin to put a language on my experience, an analytical tool. You know, I had a frame now for understanding all the stuff that I had been dealing with. (Glenda 2)

Developing a systemic analysis of oppression and a thorough understanding of the way that racism worked helped Glenda to make sense of a feeling that she carried for a long time. With a framework for how racism works, she could get beyond just feeling like racism was morally wrong and that a deficiency existed within her, but instead she gained an understanding of the system. She explains,

It brought it all together, it did, in a systemic way...- I hadn't put that together for myself, you know. And that did it. I knew that racism was wrong, and I knew that it had to do with institutions, but I didn't have - I just did not have the conceptual framework for how it worked. I just knew that it was bad, that it was morally wrong, theologically wrong, and that it was oppressive to me and my people. But I didn't get the way it worked in the same way that most people today don't get the way it works. I mean there's the invisibility, and so that was what really, I think, began my serious transformation in terms of institutional understanding. (Glenda 2)

Marisa joins Glenda in acknowledging that increasing her intellectual understanding of a system of oppression and connected disciplines helped her support her process of liberation. She says that the intellectual learning helped her to feel more grounded in herself and her own story.

Because everything that I have done intellectually is totally about my liberation. So like doing women's studies was totally about my liberation, right? Doing social justice education is about me as much as it's about how do I become a good teacher or a good facilitator or whatever. So the more I learned about history, the more I learned about women's issues, the more I learned about queer issues, the more grounded in myself I felt. Like it's a - you can be an eclectic queer, you know, different kind of black person. (Marisa 3)

For Marisa, the exploration of a systemic understanding of racism through social justice education and women's studies broadened her perspective of what it meant to be Black and therefore she was able to include herself in her definition of Blackness. As an educator, she now realizes that Blacks are often kept in ignorance which is a function of a system of racism and contributes to internalized racism. She continues, "You know, one



of the things I'm very attuned to being an educator, we are kept in ignorance. Like that's part of the structure of racism." (Marisa 3) Marisa feels like she has been able to move in her journey of liberation because she continues to learn all that she can about racism.

I do think knowledge is power. I think studying racism, learning all that we can about it - not only studying racism, because I also feel like racism doesn't have to be what defines us. That's another part of liberation for me. (Marisa 3)

Stephanie, who completed her dissertation on the messages that she received about her weight, drew connections about the messages that she gained about race. She believes that as she studied racism, it was easier for her to unpack the negative messages of internalized racism and that they consumed her less.

Well, I think once you begin to recognize the messages, it's much easier - you get to that much quicker. You know, like after doing my dissertation, it's like I'm constantly aware of what I'm thinking about weight, and just going - click. So I actually think it becomes very, very easy, the more you unpack it and the more you study (racism) and the more you understand it. And then you have to make a commitment too to like okay, this is not important - I'm done with it, or I'm not gonna let this consume me. (Stephanie 3)

### Importance of Support in the Process

Almost all of the participants mentioned having individuals in their lives who encouraged their liberation process. Glenda admits that she stays in the process of liberation by surrounding herself with like minded people. She says, "... And the way we keep doing it is to surround ourselves with people who are on the journey towards liberation, who can tell the stories of liberation, and can share strength and hope."

(Glenda 3) Earlene agrees, "I think it's important that you're not in the journey by yourself" (Earlene 3). Glenda cites a group of fellow female pastors that support not only her liberation around race, but also her liberation around gender and sexual orientation,

Well, the women, this group of women pastors that I've been a part of for 25 years. And I think that they would understand, as I do, that the liberation from internalized racism is just a piece of the liberatory process in general – that it's not just about being free from internalized oppression. It's about being free from internalized sexism, from the superwoman complex that African American women chiefly have to deal with, from internalized homophobia, from my own addictive behavior. So being a part of a group that knows and loves me, and has seen my own peaks and valleys, certainly has been a help. (Glenda 2)

Lauren has found support with a friend who shares her own stories of liberation.

So yeah, I think some of that has changed, like as I've started to think about just sort of these issues and sort of finding, okay, who are the right people that are gonna sort of get me in the right place, but not get me into their place, but get me to whatever my right place is. And one of the things that I've really liked about this friend of mine – the one who was always telling me the Marcus Garvey quote about straightening my hair – she has been one of those people for me. That she is Afro-Latina – I would say that of the two of us, she's the Afro-centric one – if somebody is gonna get that label, it's probably her. But she's also like vegan, and she's also, traveled fairly extensively internationally and not just to where black people go, but just any kinds of places. And so I – partly being friends with her has helped me understand that that process doesn't have to – you don't have to go to Namibia and like shave your head and start wearing a dashiki or something for that to be like the end of your process. That she's helped me sort of see that the process can look a lot of different ways. And there isn't like one – and it was just totally dumb, which I knew, but there isn't one way to be a black person...And she's been one of those people who's been really helpful in that. (Lauren 2)

Lastly, Paula is reminded to stay in her process of liberation by her friends.

Again, I gotta go back to your associates, you know, your friends, your people that you run with. Because if they're good friends, and they're on the path, they keep you on the path. They won't let you fall off. They remind you of stuff, either in yourself or in the world. (Paula 2)

### Continued Manifestation of Internalized Racism in Liberation Process

This last finding has the potential to impact the interpretation of Jackson's (2001) Racial Identity Development model. One thing that I found in the interviews was that the participants would share about their own manifestations or examples of internalized racism that they were conscious of, but then talk about something that they did in their

lives currently to exhibit their continued struggle with internalized racism. An earlier example of Liza's inability to read her teaching evaluations currently, demonstrates that in the midst of her movement in liberation, she still struggles with internalized racism. Additionally, during the interviews, Lauren repeated current struggles with her hair texture and style and states here that she still struggles.

And we're all kind of layers of things – we're not just this one thing. I mean that helps some, but I still think that I have stuff that's still there that I don't know how to - that I'm still sort of working through around like my hair and the way that I look and that kind of stuff. (Lauren 1)

Paula continues to struggle with confidence as an intellectual. She spoke about contrasting her intelligence with others even in her role as a professor.

I don't know – I would think – I don't know if I could do it because I think it's somewhat situational. I could think there are moments when I could just go into a situation and — you know, just me and I'm – no, I'm gonna say it differently. I think there's always a piece of me that feels less than at an intellectual level – that would be it, right? It wouldn't be looks, it wouldn't be style – it would be the intellectual level. Now why that? I think because when I went to that all-white school, I began to decline in my work and not ever be recognized for my strengths. But it's mostly that my work – and my confidence declined, and then my work declined, and those got attached.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Paula Yeah, so I think that's there much of the time.

Interviewer: And even as a professor.

Paula: Yes.

Interviewer: That might be some of the time that you struggle?

Paula: (Sigh) Yes, in comparing myself to others, you know, I would tend to see other people as smarter than I am, number one – that's a conversation all the time. Is this bullshit internalized oppression, or is this hey, these people are pretty smart, you know, they really are." (Paula 1)

Tabitha says that she still struggles with the concept of there being only one way to be Black.

Yeah, and I can joke about it now. I was like, totally, ya'll were black folks who were not supposed to like me and I was gonna be found out. And so there's still some of that in there. I can feel it. I was actually talking with Molly before, that um, you know if we brought a group of about five, six black folks in, as much as my mind knows that there is no essentialized Black-, if we brought six black people in and said, 'nope, we're taking your card back. We don't even know how you got a card in the first place, but we're taking it back.' I would cry, totally, because I would believe them. And it just sounds so ridiculous coming out of my mouth, that's still there. I can feel it in my body. It's still there. And I still-, it's a running question. I don't think it holds much weight anymore, I still have the running question around attraction. That's just one of those constant running, and this area is not helping me with that. It's like right, I would have to move to a city to really have it challenged well. (Tabitha 3)

Earlene believes that the system becomes so much a part of your cognition that you will never be free of internalized racism.

But, I mean the point of it is, is to me the dominant oppressive, racist system so becomes a part of your psyche that it's insidious, you don't even realize that you still have pieces, so, something's apt to crop up tomorrow, but I'll think, "Oh man, I thought THAT?" You know, so, yeah, I, I wouldn't say I'm free. Yeah, I'm not free of it, no. (Earlene 1)

### The Story of Denise – A Negative Case in the Findings

It can be noted that one participant's quotes are noticeably absent in the examples given above for the thematic findings. One participant, Denise, interview data was inconclusive when compared to other participants' data and therefore are presented as a negative case. As a negative case, Denise's interviews contradict the patterns noticed in other participants' data collection. As seen below, her understanding and discussion of internalized racism and liberation create a situation of a deviant case to what I found with other participants (Johnson&Christensen, 2010).

Denise, a 43 year-old participant was raised in a mid-sized city on the East Coast. As mentioned in the participant profile chapter, during her interviews, Denise did not feel that she was in a liberatory process because she felt she had never faced oppression. Though she knew racism existed in the world, giving the example that she grew up seeing her grandmother work for a white woman as a domestic, Denise felt that her life was not one where she felt oppressed, therefore did not feel like she had anything to be liberated from. When examining the participant questionnaires, Denise only marked one manifestation of internalized racism on the instrument, but marked all of the listed manifestations of liberation. During her interviews she told the story of growing up in an all people of color and predominately black neighborhood, attending all black schools from elementary through college, and feeling like she grew up in a very insular Black community. Her quotes below express her lack of connection to the phenomenon of internalized racism and liberation. When asked about how she would define liberation, she says that she would never use the word and equates it to a friend choosing to cut her hair short,

Interviewer: How would you talk about liberation as a black person?

Denise: Mine would probably be - that's funny - first of all, it's not a word that I've ever used. And I can tell you the first time I've heard anyone in my family or friend circle use the word was about about eight years ago. And it was a girlfriend of mine who cut all of her perm out and went natural, and she now has dreads. And she described cutting her hair off and not having this responsibility as liberating.

Denise: And I thought, cutting your hair can be liberating? My God! So that same summer, I cut my hair, and it was wonderful - I don't know about liberating because I didn't have - I wear my hair in a braid, so I don't have real challenges - just swoop it on back and pack it down with some gel or something, I'm good to go. But it was definitely freeing. (Denise 2)

When asked to describe liberation, she continues,

It's not a word that I use, only because I think it just isn't in my vocabulary to use. So we'll see how I use it after this now that you're adding it. How would I describe liberation?

Interviewer: Yeah, as a black person.

Denise: I think my first description - so this is the first time I'm needing to describe it - I think I would probably first do a comparison. So if I were talking to my children, my daughter, my 10-year-old, and I needed to describe liberation, I would probably compare slavery to freedom - all the things that we can do that other black people couldn't do, is how I would probably describe liberation. And then I would probably give the Toni story, and she probably wouldn't get it. And then personally - I don't know because it - liberation feels - I think I've always had liberation. Like and when I didn't have it, I didn't know I didn't have it, so I don't know I have a I so I can now do this. I guess, you know, maybe now that I make more money, I can buy more, but I don't think I would equate that with liberation.

Interviewer: Yeah.

Denise: I don't think -

Interviewer: Do you see yourself as a part of an oppressed group?

Denise: As part of a group, yes, I'm in there, but I don't feel oppressed. No. I mean and I knew it was there, but it wasn't there in my world. Like I told you my great grandmother, when she worked for the white woman. (Denise 2)

The segment above clearly shows Denise stating that she has not experienced oppression and therefore does not believe she has internalized racism. She identifies that as an African American and identifies as part of a group that has been oppressed, but she clearly states that she herself does not feel oppressed, therefore does not feel like she feels the need to adopt a process of liberation.

Denise: So it is not a word that some 43 - in the 43 years of living that I would have ever - liberating just feels like exhilarating, like I've shed something, and it's everything I've been working for, I finally have it. I don't feel that way.

Interviewer: Even as an African American woman?

Denise: No. I don't feel like I've worked - I definitely don't feel like I've fought for anything. I don't feel like I've worked hard. Liberating to me feels like you've had some real pain and you've overcome it. I don't have any pain. And where there are pain points, I think some of them are sort of natural pain points, like the death of my father. But nothing that seems so big that I can use the word liberated. (Denise 3)

Uniquely, though, Denise said she did not feel like she was oppressed, she did state during the interviews that she felt the need to sometimes wear a "mask" at work as an African American woman. She stated that she did not feel like she could always be herself at work and often believed that she needed to act a certain way in white workspaces.

As I analyzed Denise's interviews, I drew the conclusion that Denise's lack of systemic understanding of racism and lack of clear definition of internalized racism produced this outlier-type response to the interviews. When asked to define internalized racism, Denise defined it only as Black on Black discrimination. Though her definition did not venture far from one of the manifestations given in the literature, that singular understanding of the phenomenon, impacts her understanding and ability to talk about liberation. Though she was able to assess manifestations of liberation that were listed on the questionnaire, she saw them as behaviors and attitudes that she naturally held, as opposed to things that she overcame or achieved.

The inclusion of Denise as a participant in the study feels significant because in exploring internalized racism and liberation through the racial identity development model framework, her perspective is that of an outlier. As an African American woman who has a Black racial identity she is proud of and confident in, yet having little conscious about struggling within a system of racism, I don't have a clear and conclusive

analysis for her responses. I will include further thoughts about the importance of Denise's case in the suggestions for future research.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

#### Introduction

This dissertation sought to explore how internalized racism affects African American women's perception of the world and self; how internalized racism is behaviorally and psychologically manifested; and how one challenges the internalized racism and moves in the direction of liberation. To that end, I investigated the ways that:

1. African American and Black women define and contextualize the phenomenon of internalized racism and liberation in their lives
2. Internalized racism and liberation manifest in the lives of African American and Black women
3. Internalized racism and liberation have impacted the lives of African American and Black women
4. Factors support African American women in their process of liberation.

In this final chapter, I will discuss the research findings and their likely impact on classroom and social justice teaching. I begin by summarizing and discussing the major findings of the study. Next, I explore the implications that the study has on Black racial identity development models and teaching about racism. Lastly, I conclude with suggestions for further research and my concluding remarks.

## Summary of Major Findings

### Relevance of Background Characteristics and Intersecting Identities

The data for this study was collected from in-depth phenomenological interviews with 11 African American and Black women, including the researcher. Each of the participants completed a pre-questionnaire prior to participating in the interview portion of the study. The questionnaire measured the participants awareness of self-perceived cognitive and behavioral manifestations of both internalized racism and liberation as named in the literature (Akbar, 1996; Bivens, 2005; Bryant, 2000; Flynn, 2000; Hill, 1995; hooks, 1995; Norrington-Sands, 2002 ). The sample included perspectives from women ages 25 to 65 and who self-identified as both African American and Black. All participants have their bachelor's degrees and a majority of the participants have graduate degrees or are in the process of obtaining terminal degrees.

As a result the lack of empirical research on the phenomenon of internalized racism (hooks, 1995; Speight, 2007), this study yielded several unique findings connected to identity that could contribute to ideas for future research. After examining the findings stratified by age by decade (20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, and 60s), the participants' experience with internalized racism did not vary. No matter the age of the participant, the data showed that an experience with internalized racism was present and clearly defined. Additionally, age did not impact the participants' ability to define, notice and describe experiences of liberation. Lastly, a participant's socioeconomic class identity did not appear to have an impact on participants' experience of internalized racism or movement toward liberation.

## Connecting the Findings to the Literature

Throughout the research study, I was able to understand and ground my analysis of participant thinking, experiences and the meaning that they made of internalized racism and internalized because of the strong connection that the data had with previous literature. Reviewing the themes developed through analysis against the grounding literature finds that much of the data collected is consistent with the theories presented about internalized racism and liberation.

During interviews, participants were asked to define both internalized racism and liberation and findings showed that the study yielded themes similar to the definitions provided in the literature. The themes of *Taking on the oppressive thoughts of the dominant culture* and *Self-loathing / Believing in own inferiority* surfaced as participant themes for the definition. *Taking on the oppressive thoughts of the dominant culture* can clearly link to the perception of theorists who name that internalized racism is connected to the cultural imperialism of a dominant white culture that exists in the United States.

Both colonization psychology theorists and psychology of slavery theorists posit that it is the supremacist culture that individuals end internalizing can be named as internalized racism. This finding is consistent with the way that theorists discuss definitions as distinguishing factors of the phenomenon of internalized racism. In the psychology of slavery theory, both Akbar and Leary name that internalized racism as a perception of a limited identity and the adoption of the racist beliefs about the subordinate group as promoted by the group that has power. Additionally, colonization psychology theorists mention specifically that the psyche of the oppressed are affected by the physical limitation of the colonization. The definitions given by participants particularly note the

ways in which internalized racism is psychologically limiting. Additionally, participants' definition of self-loathing/ believing in own inferiority is consistent with Leary's heading of "vacant esteem" (Leary, 2005) which connects to the ways in which participants named that they sometimes saw themselves as having little to no worth.

Similarly, when exploring the major themes expressed by participants about the definition of liberation, *Feeling good about self/ recognizing inherent value*, *Developing Courage/Using Your Voice*, and *Noticing and Refuting Racist Concepts* they, too, corresponded with consequences cited by psychology of slavery and colonization psychology theorists. Again, psychology of slavery theorists specifically name courage as a major factor of beginning a continuous liberation journey, and colonization psychology theorists connect courage to the ability of an individual to pursue liberation actively and consciously. Colonization psychology's theory of the need to confront the "propoganda, management, and manipulation" (Freire, 1970) of the colonizing culture speaks to the power of *noticing and refuting racist concepts* as named by the participants in the study. Love's discussion of having a commitment to "daily enactments of liberation" (Love, 2008) connects to participants' naming liberation as an *ongoing evolutionary process*. As part of their definition of liberation, many of the participants talked about liberation as an *Ongoing Evolutionary Process* that they faced everyday. This ventures from the way that some of the theorists and authors talked about liberation being a final end point in a journey (Ruth, 2006).

The analysis of the examples of manifestations of internalized racism given by participants, produced the themes of *Choosing to be separate from Black Community or Other Black People*, *Believing physical/ behavioral traits associated with Blackness as*

*Negative, Self-Devaluing, Not Feeling 'Black enough'/Believing in the Essentialist Black Myth, and White is Right.* These themes again are similar to the manifestation of internalized racism provided in the literature. The psychology of slavery theorists talk at length about the affects that internalized racism has on the relationships within the Black and African American community linking to the finding *choosing to be separate from Black community or other Black people.* Akbar specifically names that in group color discrimination is a damaging manifestation of internalized racism and that is exemplified by the story that Lauren shares about the skin tone of her cousin's young child. And again, the pattern of self devaluing as named by the participants corresponds to the limited identity theme that Leary shares in her writing. The last major manifestation as noted by participants, *white is right* is named by Jackson as an example of a manifestation in the *Acceptance* stage in his model and Leary names it as the adoption of the master's racist socialization which has the individual believing that that only the dominant culture's way of thinking, dress, beauty among other cultural ideologies are superior to that of Black culture.

Similarly, when exploring the major themes expressed by participants about the manifestations of liberation, *Having Confidence and Comfort/Feeling Good About Themselves, Claiming their Voice/Self-Advocacy, and Living a More Authentic Life* they, too coincided with the literature reviewed. All of the theorists discussed the need to have a mental liberation (Akbar, 1970; Leary, 2005) occur in a process of liberation and the finding having confidence is an example of how that mental liberation is manifested in the participants. Additionally, colonization theorists name that self-recovery and

movement toward an authentic nature (Freire, 1970) as key in obtaining a liberatory consciousness.

The exploration of the examples that participants provided as ways that internalized racism impacted their lives, produced the themes of *Feeling of Low Self-Esteem / Self Loathing, Caused separation from other Blacks/Black Community and Family, and Overworking/Working to Disprove Stereotypes Associated with Blacks*. These themes again are similar to the manifestation of internalized racism provided in the literature.

Similarly, when exploring the major themes expressed by participants about the ways that liberation impacted their lives, participants cited *Living More Boldly/Able to be Productive, Increased Self-Care, Expanded of color friendships, Ability to hear others' pain/ more compassion, and Changed perspectives about White People* they also matched the literature reported earlier in the study.

The data provided an additional set of findings that seemed important to share. When analyzing the data there appeared to be two factors that encouraged participants' discovering and staying in the process of liberation. Participants noted themes such as *Impact of Education on Participants' Process of Liberation, an Importance of Support in the Process* as central themes. Additionally, it is important to note that participants *continued to manifest internalized racism in the liberation process*. These themes were not mentioned in the literature and could be considered significant findings. More discussion of these themes will be presented in the section on future research. In addition to all of the themes presented as a result of the analysis, one participant was cited as having a different experience with internalized racism and liberation.

## Discussion of the Findings

### Implications for Racial Identity Development Models

As I reviewed the findings seeking an answer to the central research question, “What is (are) the experiences of African American and Black women engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism?,” the data shows that the experience of African American and Black women is one that is complex and which has the presence of guiding principles, all which include a focus on reclaiming one’s power as a woman of color.

The study has given me more nuanced understanding and a stronger commitment to the value of racial identity development models to assist individuals make meaning of their experience with their racial identity in a system of racism. In his most recent writing on the Black Identity Development Model, Jackson (2001) focuses some of his writing on the importance of the stage transitions. He states,

Transitions also occur between each of the other stages in BID. . . It is important to understand that the transition from one stage of consciousness to another can be, and often is, a challenging, even a traumatic process. . . While there is still much to be learned about the transition points from one stage to the next in BID, it seems clear that if the stages are the snapshots of a moving picture, it is the stage transitions that provide the action. While the stages and the stage transitions are experienced very differently and have a different effect on the individual who is experiencing them, we must understand that we need them both to make this Black identity development process come alive (Jackson, 2001, p.16-18).

The current study fills a gap in the literature about the current stage model as it provides insight into the transitions that Jackson discusses above. The findings from the current study provide insight about the steps participants took, processes that they went through in the midst of a process of liberation and provides a qualitative exploration into what actually happens in transitions between stages of the BID. In order to understand the

contribution of this study to the current stage model, and more specifically the transitions that occur between the Acceptance stage and the Resistance stage in Jackson's model (Jackson, 2001), I have chosen to focus my discussion on four salient themes noticed in the literature. The study found that Black and African American women in a process of liberation: a ) Move from experiencing lack of control to an experience of having agency; b) Gain agency from developing greater knowledge and pride of a positive black identity; c) Replace negative socialization with a knowledge of self ; d) Are supported in their liberation by a systemic analysis of racism. Though not listed in a particular order and should not be seen as "steps" to liberation, these discussion points could be seen as building on one another when exploring a process of liberation.

#### Moving from Experiencing a Lack of Control to an Experience of Having Agency

Throughout the study, participants demonstrated through their examples of both manifestations of internalized racism and of liberation, that the process of liberation from internalized racism is one of feeling a lack of control to one of having agency in her life. Referring back to the metaphorical descriptions participants used to define the two phenomena, it can be noted that the participants first used limiting descriptors such as chains, or feel boxed in to describe their definition of and experience with internalized racism. Looking further at the participant metaphors and descriptors used for liberation, participants spoke of freedom and optimism, while noting that there was sometimes struggle in the process of liberation. Additionally, the participants told stories of experiencing a lack of control in the way that they were seen (or saw themselves) when they had less awareness of their internalized racism. In contrast, participants named the ability to have ownership of the way that they saw themselves and continue to take



courageous steps as part of their process of liberation signifying that in a process of liberation from internalized racism, individuals have the ability to begin accessing their human agency and power. This finding is in agreement with theorists reviewed in the literature. Theorists of the psychology of slavery cite the importance of courage as a major factor of liberation in order to look beyond the illusion of a racist society and be brave about taking responsibility for the self. Connecting it to the transitions model of the Black Identity Development model, it offers another perspective to the traumatic picture that Jackson paints and provides a glimpse into what an individual might feel as part of their transition in the stage models.

#### Gain Agency from Developing Greater Knowledge and Pride of a Positive Black Identity

Though only specifically named by Marisa in the interviews, a majority of the participants gave examples of or spoke to the ways in which they began to experience their Black identity from a more prideful and powerful place in their process of liberation. Connected to the theoretical literature, such a theme is noted in the colonization psychology literature. Theorists report (Memmi, 1970; Fanon, 1970; Jackson, 2001) report that having a greater knowledge of the history and culture of one's own identity group offers a chance for the oppressed or colonized person to begin to see their own group as strong and valuable. In the data, some participants described having the chance to read literature by Black authors, take courses in Black history, and connect with other Black people who could support them in their liberatory process offered a chance for them to have greater knowledge about their Black identity and begin to define it for themselves rather than having it defined by the White society. This offers further insight into the stage transitions that are discussed by Jackson because as connected to the

previous discussion point of the importance of gaining agency in a process of liberation, this discussion point gives insight to one way that agency is accomplished.

#### Replacing Negative Socialization with a Knowledge of Self

Strongly connected to the previous discussion point, the data analysis produced findings about the power of replacing negative socialization with a knowledge of self which can contribute to participants' process of liberation. Many participants told stories of challenging the messages that they were given about Black people and culture, and using their understanding of a systemic analysis of racism to re-examine those messages and replace them with new information of success, pride, confidence, and positive self-esteem to assist with their process of liberation. In gaining a greater sense of self and particularly centering in on a positive Black identity, participants were able to feel more secure in the absence of the negative socialization that they had taken in from society. This discussion point offers a connection to Jackson's BID Redefinition stage in that in that stage, individuals' sense of Blackness and Black culture is reaffirmed. It is shown through the examples given by participants that their taking opportunities to learn about or connect with other Blacks and African Americans assisted with replacing that negative socialization and provided an opportunity for the redefinition to occur.

#### Receiving Support in Liberation by a Systemic Analysis of Racism

A distinguishing finding that was not a formally measured was participants' previous experience with a systemic definition and understanding of racism. During their interviews a majority of the participants gave examples of taking or teaching courses that included systemic analysis or gave examples that implied that they had some familiarity with an institutionalized racist system at work giving more power to whites. As stated

above, this systemic analysis of racism contributed to their process to liberation because knowledge helped individuals understand that a system of white supremacy contributed to the messages that they received and the way that Black people were seen. This is a unique finding because it offers direct implication for how race and racism is taught and what the benefit can be for racially subordinated people if exposed or taught about a systemic knowledge of racism. Jackson's BID model does not offer potential steps or helpful processes as part of his explanation of transitions between the stages. By naming the ways in which individuals move toward liberation and the experience of individuals in their process of liberation, these findings offer an opportunity for more precise micro and macro processes to be developed to move further away from internalized racism.

One important finding that I noticed in the data was that internalized racism was not completely absent from the participants' experience while they were developing a liberatory consciousness and in a process of liberation as I previously believed. Instead their internalized racism seemed to lessen or to have less power on their lives or they had the opportunity to be less affected by a particular version of a manifestation of internalized racism that they seemed to wrestle with before. This finding has the potential to explain Jackson's explanation about the stage transitions when he says, "During these transition periods, a person may appear to him or herself and to others to be in two stages simultaneously. This seeming two-stage consciousness results from that phase in the stage transition process when one is leaving, or exiting, on stage of consciousness and trying on, or entering the next stage." (Jackson, 2001, p. 16) As a result of the data collected and appearance of participants acting out manifestations from two stages, it appears that this is exactly what Jackson is discussing. But the data and

Jackson's model seems inconclusive about how long an individual might stay in the transition point and what the completion of the movement from one stage to the other might look like.

The stage models provide the frame for understanding that Black/African Americans can and naturally move toward a liberated perspective and the discussion points presented above offer a nuanced insight to what occurs in the transition between the stages. Additionally, the theories offer hope for individuals to explore and seek an identity beyond internalized racism. Though the Black Identity Development model gives examples of the ways in which internalized racism may manifest and the description of the phenomenon is comparable to the definitions of internalized racism as shown in the literature, as they are currently written, the racial identity development models don't seem to capture the re-appearance of early distress patterns around the messages that were taken in as a result of racism. Though not enough data was collected to support the development of a theory, I noticed that some participants spoke of having specific areas where they still struggled with internalized racism, as opposed to facing others. For example, Paula gave the example of being given the message that she wasn't intelligent as a result of being in racist classrooms as a child, and even as a professor now, she said she still struggled with seeing herself as intelligent and she named that as a part of her internalized racism. Though the racial identity development model states that the process of the stages should be seen as cyclical, the stage model still feels unclear in cases such as Paula's.

In this process my thinking about the racial identity development models and a process of liberation transformed. At the time of my dissertation proposal defense, I

believed that I would receive an answer from one of my participants that would guide me to the perfect path of liberation, and that seems naïve at this point. Maybe because of my previous linear understanding of the stage models, I believed the participants in the study would have a prescription for achieving a final destination of liberation. Through the collection and analysis of data my perceptions transformed and changed to understand that internalized racism, as long as we live in a racist society, is something that has the potential to surface at any time. With the awareness that liberation is an option, an experience of liberation is possible for Blacks and African Americans as they seek to self define in the midst of a racist society. These themes also each lead to implications for both teaching and future research.

#### Implications for Teaching

In analyzing this data research, there are additional implications on the field of social justice education in that educators need to be intentional about teaching about internalized racism when they teach about race and racism which will be discussed below.

- Participants talked about the importance of having a systemic framework for oppression, and racism more specifically, as being helpful to their liberatory process. Therefore, it is important for people teaching about social justice to include the systemic nature of racism and the ways in which racism can be internalized from a dominant and subordinate perspective.
- It is important for educators to pay attention to the ways in which racism manifests in the classroom. Though this study did not focus on roots of internalized racism, a number of participants told stories of experiencing racism in

their elementary and junior high school classrooms at the hands of predominantly white teachers and students. Those experiences and messages impacted the way that the participants saw themselves and their experience of internalized racism.

- In teaching about a system of racism, it is important to balance the external manifestations of a system of racism with the discussion and exploration of the internalized dynamics and manifestations of racism. Internalized racism is a part of teaching race and racism and it is key to the work of helping others obtain a liberatory perspective, particularly people of color.

#### Suggestions for Future Research

As a result of the study, suggestions for further research have emerged,

- Additional research should be conducted on how individuals on how to teach about internalized racism. Through this research create a better understanding of how people make sense of the phenomenon of internalized racism and a process of liberation from internalized racism could emerge.
- The current study only conducted interviews with African American and Black women. Further research is needed to explore the impact of internalized racism on African American and Black men.
- As stated earlier, additional research could be done on the ways that internalized racism continues to be manifest. If it is based in earlier messages that are taken in, why do individuals hold onto some of the earlier messages and are able to challenge others?

### Concluding Remarks

It is hard for me to believe that at the beginning of this study I once thought that manifestations of internalized racism would be handled once and for all if we just did something specific and clear in our lives – that we could be done in one fell swoop. Maybe that was my hope talking. I wanted my struggle with my own internalized racism and pain to be gone. I wanted to find the Holy Grail that would be the answer to my search – the salve for my wound inflicted by racism. The wounds that have been inflicted by racism and the way that I internalized it were vast and deep. The sore that is caused by a deep wound takes a long time to heal – and years later, the scar is still visible on the skin. Internalized racism feels like this ever moving wound that feels un-healable - and I think I wanted it to be healable. I think I wanted someone to show me that they were living free – free from internalized racism.

I realized as I thought about my title of the study – Earlene’s quote, ‘a process of becoming’ – internalized racism hasn’t allowed black women (or any other women of color) to just ‘be’ – we never learned that. Instead we learned that we lacked – lacked beauty, lacked intelligence, lacked brilliance, lack competency – lacked whatever it was that made us complete, not able to psychologically or mentally take in from the beginning that we were and are complete. The journey that my participants are on - indeed is their ‘process of becoming’ – because the participants don’t quite understand that they already are. What are they becoming, though? This journey or process of liberation is a unique journey one that is hard to define.

During the interviews, I used the definition ‘ways to live beyond/outside of the internalized racism’ as a way to define liberation – and I sit here on the other side of my collected data realizing that there may be no way to ever live beyond internalized racism – or that liberation is not about living outside of it, but rather is about living a fuller life in the midst of it. I end this study again with a passage from Bell’s *Faces at the Bottom of the Well*. Upon deciding to venture to Afrolantica, the African Americans boarded an armada of ships deciding to emigrate to the new found land that would allow them a feeling of freedom and peace from the system of racism that they faced in the United States. As they got closer to the island, to their surprise, the mass of land began sinking, disappearing back into the vast ocean from which it came. Shockingly, the people on the boats did not despair at the loss of Afrolantica because they found that they possessed the ability to live proud, confident, and free within.

...the miracle of Afrolantica was replaced by a greater miracle. Blacks discovered that they themselves actually possessed the qualities of liberation they had hoped to realize on their new homeland. Feeling this was, they all agreed, an Afrolantica Awakening, a liberation - not of place but of mind... Their faces glowed with self-confidence, as they walked , erect and proud down the gangplanks the next day when the ships returned to their home ports. The spirit of cooperation that had engaged a few hundred thousand blacks spread to others, as they recalled the tenacity for humane life which had enabled generations of blacks to survive all efforts to dehumanize or obliterate them. Infectious, their renewed tenacity reinforced their sense of possessing themselves. (pp. 45-46)



## APPENDIX A

### REQUEST FOR PARTICIPANTS

My name is Tanya Williams and I am a doctoral student in the Social Justice Education program at University of Massachusetts Amherst. I am conducting a qualitative research study focusing on the perspectives of African American/U.S. born Black women about internalized racism (the psychological effects of racism) and the process of liberation (ways to live beyond/outside of the internalized racism.)

As part of the study, I am hoping that those who identify themselves as African American/Black and female and who are interested will complete the attached potential participant consent form and questionnaire and return it to me at [tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu). Please feel free to forward this email to friends, colleagues, and family that you think might be interested or might qualify for the study.

Also attached to this email (and pasted below). I have included an information sheet about the complete study outlining the aims of the dissertation and what would be expected of participants. Hopefully, this will answer any questions you have, but if not please contact me at [tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu). Volunteers would be greatly appreciated!

Many thanks,

Tanya O. Williams

### **Information Sheet**

#### **Working Title of Dissertation: African American Women and Internalized Racism**

#### **What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of my dissertation project is to explore the ways in which internalized racism (or the psychological impact of a racist system) impacts the lives African Americans and better understand how the phenomenon shapes past and present experiences of African Americans as a social identity group in the United States. Additionally, a hope is to explore ways to confront internalized racism and achieve liberation (a mindset and life experience beyond the system of racism) in the midst of an institutionalized system of racism.

#### **What will happen to the information that I give in the questionnaire?**

The data participants provide through the email questionnaires and consent forms will remain confidential, will be stored securely and all respondents will be given a pseudonym for the study. The data will only be read by the researcher, Tanya Williams, to select participants for the interview portions of the dissertation study. Once selected, participants will have the opportunity to participate in 3 in-depth interviews with the researcher by phone or in person.

**What do I have to do?**

Interested participants are asked to complete the attached email questionnaire consent form and questionnaire and return it to me at [tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu). Once you have submitted the questionnaire, you will be contacted by the researcher with further information on how you can continue to take part in the study.

**Further information:**

Participants should try, to their best ability, to complete the questionnaire as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Although detail is desired, participants are only expected to disclose information in which they feel comfortable sharing. Participants should not feel pressured to reveal information they do not want to reveal. Participants are also free to decline answering a question they do not feel comfortable with and ask questions about the study at any point.

If participants wish to contact the researcher or researcher's supervisor about any matter the contact details are as follows:

**Researcher:**

Tanya O. Williams  
Doctoral Student, Social Justice Education  
University of Massachusetts  
[tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu)

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Bailey Jackson  
Professor and Chair of the Social Justice Education Program  
University of Massachusetts, Amherst  
[Bailey.jackson@educ.umass.edu](mailto:Bailey.jackson@educ.umass.edu)

## APPENDIX B

### PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE CONSENT FORM

Dear Participant,

This voluntary questionnaire is designed to help identify potential participants for a qualitative research study focusing on the perspectives of African American/U.S. born Black women about internalized racism (the psychological effect of racism) and the process of liberation (ways to live beyond/outside of the internalized racism.) Before turning to the questionnaire, read the items listed below. If you are willing to participate, please sign the bottom of this sheet where indicated (or type your name if done electronically) before returning the completed questionnaire. If you have any questions, please contact Tanya Williams, at [tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu)

Thank You!

My signature below indicates that I understand the following:

- This is a voluntary questionnaire and I am under no obligation to complete it. If I decline to complete it there will be no recourse against me.
- I have the right to skip any questions that make me feel uncomfortable.
- The information that I provide will be kept confidential. It will be seen only by the researcher, Tanya Williams, and will be used only to identify potential research participants.
- By completing this questionnaire and signing this form, I am in no way obligated to participate in the research project. My signature below simply signifies that Tanya Williams may contact me if I am selected as a potential research participant.
- If Tanya Williams contacts me, I am free to decline her offer of participation in the study.

---

Participant Name

---

Signature

APPENDIX C

POTENTIAL PARTICIPANT QUESTIONNAIRE

1. Name:

2. Age:

3. Phone Number (including area code):

cell phone

home phone

office phone

4. Email Address:

5. Gender:

6. Sexual Orientation:

7. How do you identify yourself racially/ethnically?

(If you've check more than one, please explain your choices in the space below)

Asian/Asian American/Pacific Islander

Black/African American

Hispanic or Latino/Latina/Chicana/Puerto Rican/Dominican

Native American/American Indian/ Indigenous

Multi-racial / Multi - Ethnic

White/Caucasian

8. Do you define yourself ethnically in a category that was not included above?

yes

no

If yes, please specify:

9. Socioeconomic Class Background:

10. Current Socioeconomic Class:

11. Did at least one of your parent's ancestors survive chattel slavery (the forced labor of African Americans/Blacks occurring between the years of 1619 – 1865) in the United States?

yes

no

don't know

12. Where were you born (city, state, country)?
13. Where do you reside now (city, state country)?
14. Which of the following most accurately describes your generation and citizenship status (mark one):
- At least one of my grandparents, my parents, and I are U.S. born
- At least one of my parents and I are U.S. born
- I am U.S. born, my parents are not
- I am foreign born – naturalized citizen
- I am foreign born – resident alien or permanent resident
- I have a student visa

Please complete the next two questions by placing an “X” or mark in all the statements that are **TRUE** for you.

15. I currently feel, have felt, thought, or experienced one or more of the following at some point in my life regarding my racial identity and/or physical attributes: (mark all that apply)

	I have experienced dislike or extreme dislike of my skin color and/or any physical characteristics that I associate with being African American/Black.
	I, currently or at some point in my life have had no regular interaction in friendships or love relationships with other African Americans/Blacks.
	I have denied the existence of racism.
	I have sought approval from whites, often to the extent of putting whites on a pedestal.
	I have experienced or participate(d) in perpetuating cutthroat competition among other African Americans/Blacks.
	I have seen physical characteristics most widely found among Whites (thin noses, straight, thin hair, etc.) as desirable or “good,” and those most widely distributed in African Americans (course, curly hair, wider noses) as undesirable.
	Once having a level of power over other Black/African Americans, I have treated them poorly or had higher expectations of them or treated them more harshly than I treated others.
	I have wanted to be seen by Whites as “different from” other African Americans/Blacks.
	I have bought into the prevailing stereotypical perceptions and images of African Americans and have played out those stereotypes.
	I have developed and acted out defensive patterns of fear mistrust, withdrawal, and

	isolation from other African Americans/Blacks as a result of being hurt by them.
	I have accepted a narrow and limiting view of what is “authentic” Black culture and behavior.
	I have attacked, criticized or had unrealistic expectations about any African American/Black choosing to step forward and take on leadership responsibilities
	I have embraced “whiteness” (use of hair straighteners and bleaching creams, stratification by skin tone within communities of color, and believed that whites own, produce, or make are better than things produced by people of color)
	I have tried to conceal or disguise my African American/Black identity.

16. I feel, think, or actively experience one of the following when thinking about my racial identity and physical attributes now: (mark all that apply)

	I have knowledge of self and African American/Black culture and realize the strengths within both.
	I have replaced racist socialization (racist stereotypes and negative beliefs about African American culture learned through upbringing or interaction with media, friends, family, teachers, etc.) with racial (knowledge and truth about African American culture and history) socialization.
	I find strength in the solidarity of other African Americans/Blacks working to unlearn internalize racism .
	I have gained awareness of the ways African Americans/ Blacks and I (as a part of that group) has been dehumanized by racism.
	I am aware that I have occasionally tried to assimilate into the majority White society/culture as a survival strategy.
	I am rejecting a previous belief that “White is right”.
	I am thinking critically and living consciously to overcome racist messages, socialization, and exploitation.
	I am identifying and facing the pain caused by racism and refusing to use addictions and or substance abuse to dull painful realities.
	I verbally express my anger and discomfort with the institutionalized system of racism that privileges Whites and disadvantages groups of color and sometimes get involved in actions to challenge the system.
	I remain vigilant and willing to interrogate my own and others patterns of internalized racism

	I have actively rejected an assimilationist perspective or belief system.
	I have a clear sense of my racial identity.

17. Do you participate in any curricular, co-curricular or community organizations that focus on race, race relations, racism or racial inequality?

yes

no

If yes, please specify: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

### ACCEPTANCE AND REJECTION EMAIL

#### Rejection Email

Hi there,

Thank you for completing the potential participant questionnaire for my dissertation study on internalized racism. I appreciate your willingness to share part of your story and experience with me. Unfortunately, I am not able to use your experience as part of my larger study at this time. For a variety of reasons (demographic needs, identity, responses to questions, etc.), I have a fairly narrow window of participants who will be able to continue with the larger, three interview process. Know that your information and completed questionnaire will not be shared with anyone and will be erased from my email and shredded as to keep your questionnaire confidential.

Again, I truly appreciate your willingness to help me at this stage. Your participation has helped me to continue theorizing about these important issues and continued strengthening my study. If you have any questions or interest in the outcomes of my research, please feel free to write me at any time.

Take good care, t.

#### Acceptance Email

Hi there,

Thank you for completing the potential participant questionnaire for my dissertation study. I appreciate your willingness to share part of your story and experience with me. I am quite interested in having you continue with the interview portion of the dissertation study, a series of three (3), 90-minute, in-depth interviews. All three interviews are focused on the research question: *What is (are) the experiences of Black/African American women engaged in a process of liberation from internalized racism?*

- a) The first interview will be a focused life history of your experience as a Black/African American woman and experiences with race, racism, internalized racism.
- b) The second interview will explore more into the details of your experience with internalized racism and their movement toward a process of liberation from internalized racism.
- c) The last interview will ask you to reflect on the meaning of your experience of internalized racism and process toward liberation from internalized racism.

I am writing now to find out the best day and time to contact you (and if you provided multiple contact numbers, which number is best to contact you) to talk more about the next stage of research involvement and schedule the interviews. My schedule is pretty flexible, so please provide the time that is best for you.



Attached, you will also find the informed consent for the interview portion of the study that you can review prior to our conversation, and if you have any questions about it, we can discuss it on the call.

Again, I truly appreciate your willingness to help me at this stage. Your participation has helped me to continue theorizing about these important issues and continued to strengthen my study. If you have any questions, please feel free to write me at any time.

Take good care, t.

## APPENDIX E

### DISSERTATION INFORMATION SHEET AND FAQs

**Researcher: Tanya O. Williams, Social Justice Education Program, University of Massachusetts – Amherst**

**Working Title of Dissertation: African American Women and Internalized Racism**

**What is the purpose of this study?**

The purpose of my dissertation project is to explore the ways in which internalized racism (or the psychological impact of a racist system) impacts the lives of African American women. I hope to gain a better understanding of how the phenomenon shapes past and present experiences of African American women as a social identity group in the United States. I hope to explore ways to confront internalized racism and achieve liberation (a mindset and life experience beyond the system of racism) in the midst of an institutionalized system of racism.

**What will happen to the information that I give in the questionnaire?**

The data participants provide through the email questionnaires and consent forms will remain confidential, will be stored securely and all respondents will be given a pseudonym for the study. The data will only be read by the researcher Tanya Williams to select participants for the interview portions of the dissertation study. Once selected, participants will have the opportunity to take part in 3 in-depth interviews with the researcher by phone or in person.

**What do I have to do?**

Interested participants are asked to complete the attached email questionnaire consent form and questionnaire and return it to me at [tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu). After the questionnaire is submitted, you will be contacted by the researcher with further information on how you can continue to take part in the study.

**Further information:**

Participants should try, to their best ability, to complete the questionnaire as thoroughly and honestly as possible. Although detail is desired, participants are only expected to disclose information in which they feel comfortable sharing. Participants are also free to decline answering a question they do not feel comfortable with and to ask questions about the study at any point.

If participants wish to contact the researcher or researcher's supervisor about any matter the contact details are as follows:

**Researcher:**

Tanya O. Williams  
Doctoral Student, Social Justice Education  
University of Massachusetts  
[tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu)

**Supervisor:**

Dr. Bailey Jackson

Professor and Chair of the Social Justice Education Program

University of Massachusetts, Amherst

Bailey.jackson@educ.umass.edu

## APPENDIX F

### CONSENT FOR PARTICIPATION

My name is Tanya Williams and I am a doctoral student in Social Justice Education at University of Massachusetts Amherst. The topic that I have chosen to examine is a study of Black/African American women and their experience with internalized racism and their process of liberation from internalized racism. My primary purpose of this research is to explore the availability of a path of liberation from internalized racism.

This form is an attempt to clarify all of the items that you are agreeing to in taking part in this research project. I sincerely appreciate your participation and want you to feel as comfortable as possible during this process. If you have any questions about any of the consent protocol (listed below) please contact me prior to signing the consent form so that we might be able to discuss your concerns or questions.

When signing this I, \_\_\_\_\_ voluntarily consent to participate in this qualitative study and agree to the following:

1. Tanya Williams will be interviewing me three times during the interviewing process and each interview will last ninety minutes. The time will be agreed upon by both myself and the interviewer and occur in a location that is comfortable for both of us.
2. The questions that I will be answering will be focused on the topics of internalized racism and liberation and I will be candid in sharing my own experiences and histories about these topics.
3. The findings will be used in the researcher's doctoral dissertation, and may also be used in conference presentations and/or manuscripts prepared by her for professional publication. If the interviewer would like to use portions of the transcript for further research, she must contact me and get approval again.
4. The interviews will be audio and video recorded to facilitate analysis of the data. The audio and video recordings will be transcribed by the researcher into a password protected computer program. All participants will be assigned a pseudonym and all recordings and videotapes will be labeled by that pseudonym. All tapes will be kept in a locked file cabinet drawer and digital recordings will be kept on a password-protected computer only to be accessed by the researcher.

5. The study has some questions may elicit personal reactions or feelings regarding my racial identity. All questions will be optional, and I as the study participant may decline to answer any question that I do not feel comfortable answering.
6. My name will not be used and any details that might disclose my identity will be disguised in the researcher's report. I also am aware that the interviewer will be using my language extensively in her final report.
7. I have the right to withdraw at any point during the process and can do so without fear of prejudice. Though out of respect for the interviewer, if I plan to withdraw I will try to let my interviewer know as soon as possible.
8. If I am unable to make one of the scheduled interviews, I will try to let my interviewer know by phone and work to reschedule that interview for a later date.
9. I have the right to review material prior to the interviewer's final report.
10. I can contact Tanya Williams at 413-329-5847 or [tanyaw@educ.umass.edu](mailto:tanyaw@educ.umass.edu) to discuss any concerns that I might have about this consent form, the research project, or content of the interview at any time during my participation. For additional questions, I am able to contact the study's supervisor, Dr. Bailey Jackson at [bailey.jackson@educ.umass.edu](mailto:bailey.jackson@educ.umass.edu)
11. I will be given a copy of this form to keep for your records and future reference.

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read (or have had read to me) the contents of this consent form and have been encouraged to ask questions. I have received answers to my questions. I give my consent to participate in this study. I have received (or will receive) a copy of this form.

---

Participant's Signature

Date

---

Researcher's Signature

Date

APPENDIX G  
INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

**Interview Agenda**

- Welcome and thank you for participating
- Overview of procedures, expectations, and confidentiality
  - Review consent form
  - Questions about consent form
  - Sign consent form
  - Copy to keep
- Interview Questions
- Wrap-up – Questions from participant
- Thank you

**Interview #1 Questions**

**Helps establish context for participants experience with race, racism and internalized racism**

**Have the participant tell as much about as possible about herself in light of the topic at the present time**

- Tell me about the place you grew up. What was it like?
- Tell me about your experience with race up to this point in your life. With racism?
- How do you define internalized racism?
- What has your experience with internalized racism been up to this point?
- How has internalized racism affected your life?
- Where do you think you learned your internalized racism?
- How has internalized racism affected your experience up until this time in your life?
- Reconstruct early experiences in school, in families, with friends, neighborhoods, work that have to do with race, racism, and internalized racism
- How does/did your internalized racism manifest? What effects does it/did it have on your life?

- How did your process of liberation from internalized racism, as you define it, begin? What has that process looked like?
- How does your process of liberation from internalized racism manifest? What effects does it have on your life?

### **Interview #2 Questions**

#### **Reconstructs details of their experience with liberation**

##### **Concentrate on the concrete details of the participant's present experience**

- Reconstruct a day with manifestations of internalized racism and a day in a process of liberation from internalized racism.
- Put your experience with internalized racism in context of social setting/relationships w/ others and self
- Talk about your relationship w/self before awareness of internalized racism
- Talk about your relationship w/ others before awareness of internalized racism
- Talk about your relationship w/ self in your process of liberation from internalized racism
- Talk about your relationship w/ others in your process of liberation from internalized racism
- How do you define liberation?
- What do you see liberation from internalized racism looking like? In yourself? In others? In the world?
- What are examples of manifestations of your liberation?
- How has liberation affected your life?
- What has supported you in your liberation?

### **Interview #3 Questions**

#### **Encourages participants to reflect on the meaning of their experience with internalized racism and liberation**

##### **Requires participants to look at how factors interacted to bring them to their present understanding and experience of liberation**

- Given the way that you have confronted these manifestations of internalized racism, how do you see your relationships being different?
- How do you see yourself continuing to develop through your process of liberation?



- What have you been thinking about since we've started these interviews?
- What do you think started you on your path to liberation?
- How do you understand your movement toward liberation?
- What do you think spurred your movement toward liberation?
- Why do you think you moved toward liberation?
- What are ways to support the healing of the spiritual wounds of internalization?
- Do you acknowledge yourself as someone working toward liberation?
- In what ways are you working toward liberation?
- How does it feel for you to be in the midst of this liberation process? What is it like day to day?
- What is it like to be a black/African American woman in the process of liberation?
- How do you feel your relationships are affected by this process?
- Do you think there is one particular thing that started you on your path?
- What does that liberation look like?
- Do you have more to say about your experience about either / or internalized racism and liberation?
- What would you suggest to other black women to other black women who are in the process of confronting their internalized racism?
- Given your responses and reflections in interviews 1 and 2, how do you make meaning of your process? What does your process mean to you?

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