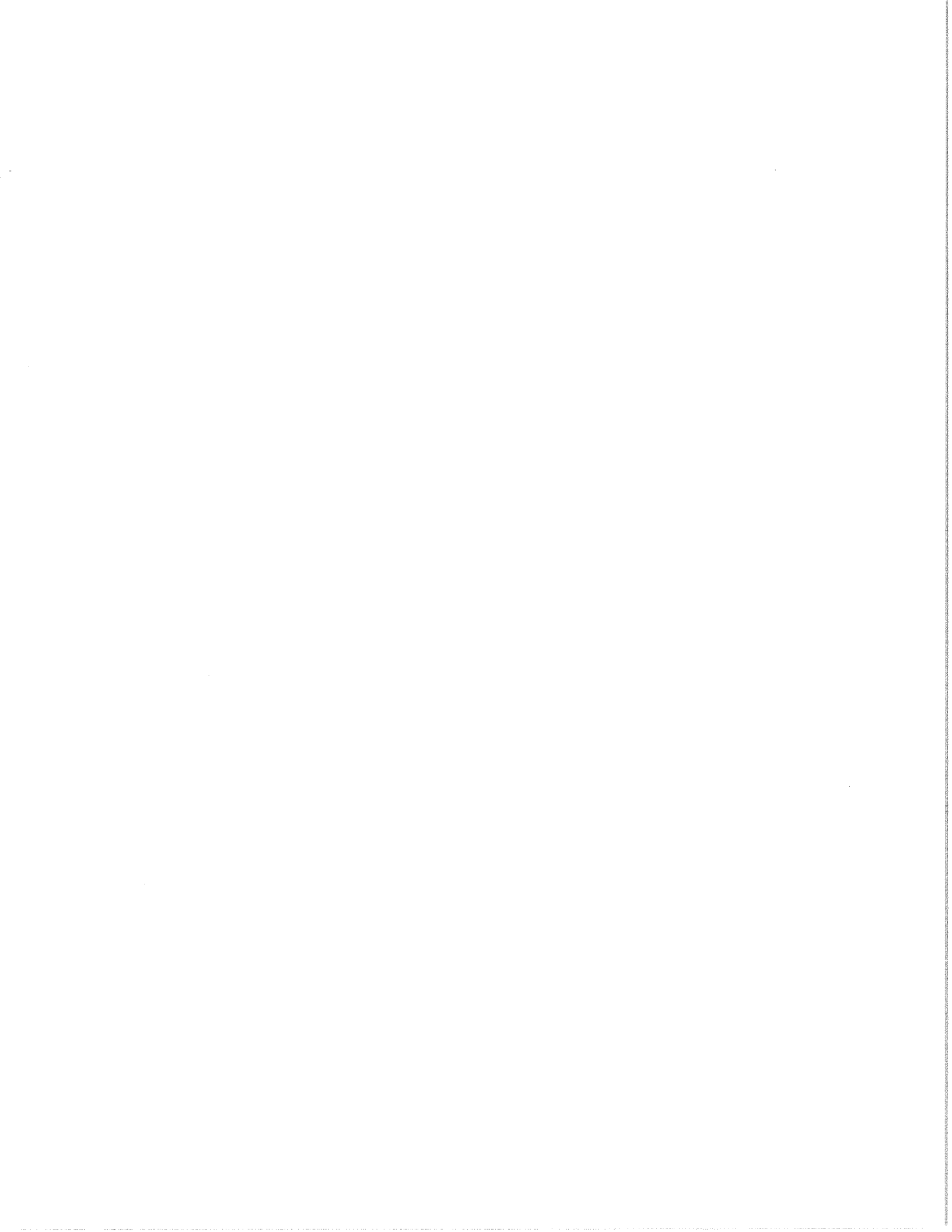


ROUTLEDGE RESEARCH IN EDUCATIONAL EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

# Race and Colorism in Education

Edited by  
Carla R. Monroe





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### 3 From Colored People to Students of Color

#### The Complexity of Colorism in Families and Educational Institutions

*John L. Taylor, Suzanne Desjardin, Irene Robles-Lopez, and Charita Johnson Stubbs*

I have experienced both the positive and negative effects of skin-color bias as a light-skinned Latina.

—Suzanne Desjardin

[In predominately White settings], White women wanted to touch my hair. I was different from the majority of my volleyball teammates—medium-brown skin with Afrocentric features, broad nose, kinky hair, and full lips. Two other Black girls were on [one of my former teams], one like me in terms of having been raised in the inner city—it was easy to relate to her. I liked my other teammate, but she wasn't like me because she spoke "proper English," drove a nice car, could buy anything she wanted, and was light-skinned. I didn't know many light-skinned Blacks growing up. She shared with me how people said she wasn't "Black enough." I thought the same thing but never shared it with her.

—Charita Johnson Stubbs

We [lived in a] part of town which was predominantly White. . . . Because [our son] was not light-skinned, he endured racism and discrimination by classmates simply because of skin color and race. His self-esteem suffered and the experience had a negative impact on his confidence and social growth. He withdrew and felt ostracized. My heart ached at the injustice he was experiencing at such an early stage of life that was supposed to be focused on the innocence of youth and learning. Eventually we transferred him to a different school with a more diverse student demographic.

—Irene Robles-Lopez

I am not biracial but I am a member of three multiracial intergenerational families. I am not unusual but overlooked in discussions about the complexity of skin-color bias. As a Black male, my fate in the families and society are experiences of being on the darkest end of the skin-color spectrum.

—John L. Taylor

Colorism, a term originally conceived by Alice Walker (1983) in her book *In Search of Our Mothers' Gardens: Womanist Prose*, is a destructive force

characterized by “prejudicial or preferential treatment of same-race people based solely on their color” (p. 290). “For colorism,” she writes, “like colonialism, sexism, and racism, impedes us” (p. 291). Walker’s recognition of color bias as a repressive influence is well placed. In the United States (U.S.), the roots of colorism can be traced back to the colonial period and era of slavery, where Blackness was debased (Jordan, 1968) and lighter-skinned children of Black slave women and White slavemasters gained ascendancy in the slave system such as by working as house slaves, being trained to complete skilled rather than common labor on plantations, receiving manumission, and perhaps most importantly during the era, becoming educated (Hunter, 2004; Williamson, 1995). The regularity of color-based privileges among enslaved and free Blacks subsequently informed the nation’s early color caste hierarchy as well as socioeconomic divisions that created identifiable Black elite (Gatewood, 1988; Perkins, 1997) and Black middle-class (Frazier, 1957/1997) sectors in post-Emancipation America.

Walker’s (1983) decision to situate the color complex alongside more commonly discussed ills of colonialism, sexism, and racism accents the power of color bias in society; modern colorism is ubiquitous and premiums are placed on light and white skin tones (Norwood, 2014; Russell-Cole, Wilson, & Hall, 2013; Thompson & Keith, 2004). Dark skin is not only devalued among Blacks, but also among Asians, Hispanics, Native Americans, and multiracial populations in the United States and globally (Bonilla-Silva & Dietrich, 2011; Glenn, 2009; Russell-Cole, et al., 2013). In the “post-racial” U.S., skin-tone prejudice is pervasive, and despite whether the practice is unintentional or deliberate within families, neighborhoods, media, the beauty industry, workplaces, and educational domains, colorism inflicts pain and inhibits social advancement, as Walker (1983) observed over 30 years ago. Within higher education, specifically, ostensible channels of meritocracy (e.g., performance-based rewards), race-neutral policies (e.g., hiring, tenure guidelines), and colorblind ideologies supposedly support efforts to move from a society in which race is a major factor in educational outcomes to a culture that is egalitarian and fully democratic. As numerous scholars have outlined, however, such approaches fail to unsettle the status quo and, in fact, typically reinforce existing patterns (Ray & Bonilla-Silva, 2009). Concurrent with overarching racial concerns, many campuses fail to ask questions about the roles of unconscious bias, implicit racism, and colorism. Like racism, colorism must be confronted in higher education because every professional and student of color knows the crushing weight of colorism, the feeling that no matter how smart they are and despite their work effort and accomplishments, outward appearance—including skin tone—will always shape their experiences.

The excerpts on inter-racial and intra-racial colorism and phenotype bias that open this chapter are drawn from a collaborative investigation involving a light-skinned Mexican American female student (Desjardin), a medium-brown-skinned Black female student (Stubbs), a medium-tan-skinned Mexican American female student (Robles-Lopez), and a dark-skinned Black

male professor<sup>1</sup> (Taylor) who are affiliated with the same predominantly White university in Arizona. The students are pursuing doctoral degrees, have families, and work full time in higher education as administrators and, in one case, an athletics coach. The research originated in our graduate course on educational leadership for diverse communities where the complexity of colorism was explored. The inquiry is part of a larger collaborative autoethnography study (Taylor, Desjardin, Stubbs, & Robles-Lopez, 2015) in which we specifically sought to investigate how colorism intersected with individual and collective “presentation of self in everyday life” (Goffman, 1959, p. 1), especially among Mexican Americans and Blacks. Our intention is to shed light on the conscious and implicit biases (Banaji & Greenwald, 2013), microaggressions (Solórzano, 1998; Sue, 2010), stigma (Goffman, 1963), and stereotype threats (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2012; Steele, 1997) that shape the complexity of color discrimination. Although some voices assert that President Barack Obama’s election for two terms signaled the country’s transition to a post-racial America (Cose, 2014; Fiske, Bergsieker, Russell, & Williams, 2009), in our view, there is a mistaken notion that color prejudice, like racism, has ended.

Colorism and racism are intergenerational problems (Bodenhorn, 2006; Burton, Bonilla-Silva, Ray, Buckelew, & Freeman, 2010; Freeman, 2012; Landor, 2013; Rondilla & Spickard, 2007). The concepts connect with issues of identity and are deeply rooted in lived cultures. Color bias involves intra-racial (e.g., family and in-group) and interracial (e.g., existing between and involving members of different races) discrimination and other phenotypicity biases (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames, & Organista, 2014; Jones, 2010; Schaerer, 2009). Skin-color discrimination is haunting, stigmatizing, and can manifest in stereotype threats for dark-, medium-, and light-skinned people alike across ethnoracial groups regardless of class or achievement. Stereotype threat (Steele & Aronson, 1995) may transpire when a person of color has a heightened awareness of concepts that are regularly ascribed to skin color and other phenotypicity stigmas (Murguía & Telles, 1996; Vasquez, 2011), especially when individuals are the only or among the few colored people of dark, tan, or light skin tones within a family, in the classroom, on a job, at a conference, in a store, and so forth. In addition, one may experience disapproval or depressed expectations. For instance, the student authors of the current chapter are post-1950s Civil Rights, first-generation doctoral aspirants and have confronted the stereotype threat of being considered affirmative action admission admits (Bracha, Cohen, & Conell-Price, 2013; Steele, 1997) and tokenized in the classroom, as discussed by Garces (2013), regardless of academic degrees and professional accomplishments. Furthermore, we are keenly aware of how K-20 institutions impart messages that connect skin-color categories to gaps in academic achievement. As Jiménez and Horowitz (2013) write, schools are institutions “where whiteness represents competence and academic success, and blackness and Latinness stand for the opposite” (p. 3).

Colorism's pervasive and customary presence in society creates challenges for researchers. It is difficult to disentangle scholarly topics from past and current situations or experiences. Therefore, our approach involved the interplay of personal engagement with introspection and interactive introspection (Ellis, 1991; Taylor, 2009) where we deliberately reflected on reactions to and impressions of our perceptions regarding skin-tone discrimination. We assert that cross-ethnoracial collaboration is a vital way to advance understanding of common experiences with colorism (Espino & Franz, 2002; Hagiwara, Kashy, & Cesario, 2012; Harvey, LaBeach, Pridgen, & Gocial, 2005; hooks, 1981; Hughes, Pennington, & Makris, 2012; Maddox, 2004; Vasquez, 2011) and uncover paths to eradicate the problem.

### Goffman's Frame Theory

How people make sense out of situations, analyze vulnerabilities, and act depends on how they cognitively perceive themselves, the world, and their surroundings (Goffman, 1974). Frames are the "definition of the situation" (in this study, for instance, situations or contexts of colorism in the family, educational settings, and academic jobs) that evolve as people negotiate the meaning of their interactions and subjective involvement in them (Goffman, 1974, pp.10–11). The concept of frame is also based on the premise that individuals may perceive the same events or interactions differently based on their experiences and understandings (Druckman, 2001; Small, 2002). Goffman (1993) suggests that "to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described" (p. 52). The colorism frame offered conceptual clarity to research and guide the ways we perceived the salience of skin color and phenotype within social realities as well as how we (re)presented these accounts individually and to each other (de Vreese, 2012). By understanding the colorism frame related to situations, contexts, and social interactions within families, education, and jobs, we can begin to understand variation in our interpretations as well as commonalities in experience.

### Mapping Colorism Across Family, Education, and Academic Job Settings

Although social scientists in the field of education do not generally examine colorism as a component of race and gender, an interdisciplinary literature review of scholarly findings revealed relatively consistent conclusions, particularly about African Americans and Hispanics in the U.S. (Hunter, 2004; Taylor et al., 2015). Here we selectively review a small number of publications to illustrate compelling findings around colorism in families, K-20 educational settings, and the workplace as related to Blacks and Latinos.

Our review discloses how oppressive conditions related to skin-tone and phenotype discrimination exist in different forms and ways across situational contexts (Padilla, 2001; Pyke, 2010; Uhlmann, Dasgupta, Elgueta, Greenwald, & Swanson, 2002; Wilder & Cain, 2011), thus pointing to the need for the current study.

Consistently, researchers document that women with light skin are judged as more attractive and desirable (Hill, 2002). One outcome of light-skinned preference in Black and Hispanic communities is that fair-complexioned women are more likely to be married (Hunter, 2004) and enjoy the benefits that accompany many married, two-parent households, such as higher household incomes and social approval. Wilder and Cain's (2011) study of 26 Black women builds on the available knowledge base by documenting the role of color ideologies and practices among Haitians, Jamaicans, Bahamians, and African Americans. According to their findings, families exerted the greatest influence on participants, surpassing the reach of the media and schools, which are commonly cited as major social influences. The women's narratives largely support the well-known assertion that Black children who have White European features receive more positive messages about their value, beauty, and worth. Although not a study of family life, Uhlmann et al. (2002) found that university students in the United States and Chile exhibited a preference for light skin versus dark skin in implicit attitudes regarding Hispanics although this finding did not hold true on all measures. According to the authors, the findings were consistent with anthropological and sociological research showing that on many dimensions, Hispanic culture privileges light- (*Blanco*) over brown- (*Moreno*) complexioned individuals, and Hispanics of mostly European descent over those of mostly Indigenous descent. In another study, Ortiz and Telles (2012) explored the role of race and racialization among Mexican Americans in relation to skin-color gradation, education, and social interactions. Darker skin was significantly related to being perceived as Mexican. Additionally, reports of discrimination were more common among participants who were darker and held at least a high school diploma although stereotyping was not related to skin color. Hunter (2016) argues that light-skin privilege follows fair-skinned Black and Hispanic children into K-12 schools, where they may benefit from a "halo effect" and receive favoritism from teachers because they are perceived as smarter, more attractive, likeable, and so forth. Conversely, dark-complexioned children may be devalued and marginalized. Empirical studies document that such speculations are, in fact, realities for many students, as dark-skinned girls are disciplined more than their peers (Hannon, DeFina, & Bruch, 2013) and light-skinned students enjoy greater success when transitioning into college and the workplace (Ryabov, 2013).

Because studies of colorism in educational settings tend to focus on student experiences, especially social dimensions such as historical color bias in Greek organizations at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (Little, 1980), and Hispanics' engagement in predominantly White universities

(Flores & Garcia, 2009; Stephens & Fernandez, 2012), little is known about the commonalities of Blacks and Mexican American professionals' experiences in K-12 schools and predominantly White institutions of higher education. In fact, studies involving women of color in academic job settings center almost exclusively on race, leaving conclusions about colorism open to question and debate.

### Focus of Current Research

Certainly, conceptual generalizations about people of color must be avoided as variants in culture, class, national identity, ethnicity, and other factors inescapably void essentialist arguments. Although a number of studies address Hispanics and African Americans' consciousness about racialized experiences (Gay, 2006; Kaufmann, 2003; Rocha, 2007; Sanchez, 2008; Telles, Sawyer, & Rivera-Salgado, 2011), few foreground colorism—especially in the field of education (Monroe, 2013, 2016). Existing works tend to highlight connections between dark skin and problematic experiences and light skin and privilege (Hunter, 2002; Thompson & Keith, 2004). In other works, authors explore perceptions of shared experiences and skin tone. Wilkinson and Earle (2012), for example, suggest that Hispanics who identify as light-skinned perceive greater commonality with Whites than those who classify themselves as dark-skinned. In addition, Hispanics who identify as light-skinned sense less commonality with Blacks than Hispanics who report having dark skin. As Wilkinson and Earle (2012) concluded, the study has implications for racial alliances as “perceptions of commonality can be seen as a precursor of coalition formation” (p. 30).

The current collaborative autoethnographic study deepens insight into the lived experiences of two Mexican American women and one African American woman with colorism and phenotypicality bias. As Hunter (2004) has noted, Mexican Americans and African Americans are two of the largest ethnic groups in the U.S. and tend to be keenly affected by colorism. Analyzing narratives related to colorism in family, education, and job experiences enables scholars to learn more about socializing agents' influence.

### Contextual Backdrop

As authors and researchers we are based in Arizona, a state that is known for drawing color lines and rebuffing “non-white” people's achievements and cultures. For example, in 1987 Governor Evan Mecham's first act in office was to rescind an executive order creating a Martin Luther King Jr. Day in Arizona. After a five-year fight, Arizona approved a holiday honoring the slain civil rights leader in 1992. The state drew national attention again in 1988 when voters passed an English-only law as an amendment to the Arizona Constitution. After ten years of litigation, the Arizona Supreme Court held that the amendment violated the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution

(Nemec, 1998). Currently, state-level policies forbid the teaching of ethnic studies in schools; the legislature recurrently violates a voter-approved law that requires basic state aid to schools; a former governor repeatedly tried to deny driver's licenses to “dreamers,” the children of immigrants who entered the country undocumented; and engages skin-color profiling with the controversial “show me your papers” immigration law SB1070, which is a legal and observable practice of phenotypicality bias.

The university with which we are affiliated is a predominantly White university in an Arizona metropolitan area. Through student affairs, the university advises numerous cultural- and identity-based student associations as well as other affinity groups such as sororities, fraternities, and religious organizations in which students share common backgrounds and offer support to one another. Some observers claim that such organizations maintain insiders and outsiders, the haves and have-nots, thus perpetuating lines of power, privilege, and status. Unfortunately, these entities sometimes represent a racialized social system with boundaries or color lines as well as the latest racial orders of skin-color stratification within the university (Bonilla-Silva, 2004; Hochschild, Weaver, & Burch, 2011). At predominantly White universities, of course, White students are the majority, but students of color populate the majority of race-conscious affinity groups. Although universities promote an inclusive climate of intergroup programming via offices of multicultural affairs, some groups still feel a need to form clusters of closed or gated communities of interest that are not demonstratively receptive to integration and pluralism initiatives that support bridging dialogues to understand commonalities across differences (Tienda, 2013).

The topic of colorism arose in our graduate course on leadership for diverse communities. The students in the course included women who were Mexican American and Black as well as White men and women. All individuals were employed as education leaders in the state and aspired to attain a doctoral degree to fulfill personal and professional goals. For the most part, all were born and worked during the post-Civil Rights era. The participant-researchers differed from the White students in skin color, language, employment, and K-20 education experiences. The course introduced multidisciplinary scholarship about the complexity of human diversity along a continuum from cognitive to cultural and highlighted the role of diversity as a dynamic for improving educators, schools, and communities as conceptualized by Page (2007). The coursework required students to explore theories and research of *cultural, human, and social capital* (Bourdieu, 1986; Coleman, 1988; Lin, 2001; Putnam, 2007; Small, 2009), *identity* (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002), *stigma* (Goffman, 1963; Link & Phelan, 2001; Major & O'Brien, 2005), and *stereotype threat* (Steele, 1997; Steele & Aronson, 1995; Steele, Reisz, Williams, & Kawakami, 2007). A basic thrust of the course was that leaders' racial and gender diversity strengthens the quality of education offered and that benefits proceed from interactions between people that foster mutual understanding and respect. A second course tenet

was that leaders would develop a critical consciousness about their own identity as they expanded their comprehension in general but specifically in communities that they intended to influence, work with, and lead in educational settings.

A sensitive subtopic that became a teaching and learning opportunity was intra-racial diversity where the class analyzed how ethnoracial groups were not monolithic but embodied variations in class, culture, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, political affiliation, and skin color (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014; Schaerer, 2009). During one lecture-discussion in particular, a provocative example surfaced about intra-racial skin-color discrimination and the paper bag test, a long-standing cultural practice where people were denied membership or entry into a colored or Black organization if their skin was darker than a brown paper bag (Kerr, 2005). The episode focused the class discussion on skin-tone categories and preferences toward whiteness as the highest socially-constructed “standard” of attractiveness. To delve deeper into racial and gender issues, the class viewed the film documentary *The Souls of Black Girls* by Daphne Valerius (2008) which examines media images, both historical and contemporary, as related to the topic of self-image. During the airing, some students’ discomfort was palatable.

Building on concepts related to the historical and contemporary parts of the documentary, scholarly works were introduced about slavery and the “one-drop rule” (Khanna, 2010; Lee & Bean, 2012), along with the *National Geographic* article “Relate: The Changing Face of America” (Schoeller & Funderburg, 2013). The article and its website display (<http://ngm.nationalgeographic.com/2013/10/changing-faces/schoeller-photography>) showcase the limitations of the “one-drop rule” by asking “What are they?” and emphasizing the ambiguity of 25 biracial and multiracial respondents’ facial features and their variations in skin tone, hair texture and color, eye shape and color, noses, and lips. These types of biracial and multiracial faces are increasing in the student bodies and classrooms of K-12 schools and higher education and can intensify unconscious bias and implicit acts of colorism (Hunter, 2016; Keith & Monroe, 2016). Students also learned about the true story presented in the film *Skin* (Fabian, 2008). The film presents the ubiquitous nature and complexity of skin-color intra-racial and interracial discrimination treacherously experienced in the family, school, community, and social life of dating and marriage by a White girl born with colored skin and kinky hair to White Afrikaner parents in South Africa during the apartheid period. The complexity of skin color, phenotype, racism, and psychological assault collided with cultural and institutional norms fully on display in this story.

In a sequence of discussions, the women of color in the class related to the issues of gender phenotypicality bias and White standards of beauty, identity, and stereotype threat presented in the films, articles, and discussions. They shared common and different experiences, showing that skin color matters and affects life chances owing to marked differences with White

standards of beauty. They expressed “living the phenomenon” in families, neighborhoods, K-12 schools, higher education, and job situations, a topic that is explored by Arce, Murguia, and Frisbie (1987), Chavez-Dueñas et al. (2014), Gómez (2000), Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, and Ward (1987), Patton (2010), Rondilla and Spickard (2007), and Stephens and Fernández (2012).

Inevitably, in uneasy ways, some White students joined the conversation by voicing experiences with sexism from feminist and critical theory perspectives. A few White women shared past and current stories about discrimination and problems of not meeting society’s physical attractiveness standards for what is considered White beauty (Wolf, 1991). However, some White females abhorred the inference that they had privilege, power, and were treated differently from women of color. The White males and some other White females were silent throughout the discussions. Absent were discussions about how their educational leadership practices, individually and collaboratively, should deal with colorism in diverse communities. Notably, however, one White female student, who was silent in classes, shared a story with the professor outside of class about teaching in a predominantly Black urban school. She related experiences involving Black girls around the subject of hair and other phenotype features as well as social class. Although she was apprehensive about sharing a sensitive story, the videos, readings, and class discussions clarified the sources of her angst and explained the locus of colorism and her White privilege. Although this student privately acknowledged her power and privilege, her out of classroom sharing with the professor, as well as the other students’ silence throughout several in-class lecture-discussions, encapsulates basic problems of tackling colorism in education: (1) the refusal to acknowledge with colleagues, particularly people of color, experiences with color prejudice that extend beyond race and (2) the refusal to undertake leadership roles in dismantling the problem. It is for good reason that Wilder and Cain (2011) assert that “colorism is a delicate issue” and recognize that researchers cannot “easily approach potential participants and ask them if they would be willing to discuss their experiences with colorism based on their skin tone” (p. 583). Furthermore, it would be problematic “to assume that women with very light or very dark skin tones would have the most interesting viewpoints to share” (p. 583).

## Methodology

As previously discussed, the purpose of the study was to document perceptions of colorism among the Mexican American and Black co-authors. By means of collaborative autoethnography methodology, specific contextual frames were explored—our families, educational spaces, and academic job settings. Autoethnography is a useful tool for educational research as the approach facilitates self-study and investigative techniques to address self-reflexive questions (Hughes et al., 2012). According to Hernandez, Ngunjiri, and Chang (2014), a collaborative autoethnography “focuses on self-interrogation but does so collectively and cooperatively within a team

of participant-researchers" (p. 17). Collaborative autoethnography inquiry gives voice to our personal experiences and biographical accounts, which offer information about structure, intensity, subtleties, and function in relation to the cultural contexts of colorism (Gale, Pelias, Russell, Spry, & Wyatt, 2013; Moore, Scarduzio, Plump, & Geist-Martin, 2013; Spry, 2001). We participated in "concurrent collaboration," where "all researchers engage in the research process steadily, often mixing individual activities with collective activities" (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2013, p. 44).

For the purpose of this chapter, we narrowed the focus to female participant researchers for three primary reasons. First, many research findings support the contention that colorism plays out differently based on gender (Thompson & Keith, 2004). Given the degree to which prevailing physical standards affect the lives of girls and women, an exclusive scholarly focus on female participants is merited. Second, women's perspectives on colorism in families tend to provide "normative references" for subsequent generations (Wilder & Cain, 2011); therefore, comprehending and eradicating colorism largely requires stimulating transformative change among women of color. Last, studying the experiences and voices of post-Civil Rights individuals infuses the study with a unique foundational strength (Loury, 2009), for as Hochschild et al. (2011) write,

... younger co-horts of Americans were raised in a different racial context and think about and practice race differently than their older counterparts do. Older Americans are products of "the sixties" and its sequelae—namely, a rise in immigration, blacks' assertion of pride and dignity, whites' rejection of racial supremacy (at least in public), a slow opening of schools and jobs and suburbs to people previously excluded, and a shift in government policy from promoting segregation and hierarchy to promoting (at least officially) integration and equality. Now, however, new institutions and practices are moving into place: official records permit people to identify with more than one race, antidiscrimination policies are well established in schools and workplaces, and some non-whites hold influential political positions. . . . Immigration and interracial relationships have produced a set of people who do not fit conventional racial categories and who change their racial identity in different contexts.

(p. 152)

As a consequence, studying post-Civil Rights age groups facilitates potentially novel insights into how contemporary educational professionals and student groups think about race and social problems that stem from color consciousness.

### Participant Profiles

**Suzanne Desjardin:** I serve as acting vice president of student development at a community college campus. I am pursuing a doctoral degree at a large,

research-intensive university, and currently raise a family with my husband. I have earned a bachelor's and two master's degrees. I am a light-skinned Mexican American female, a fifth-generation border city native, and I look Caucasian. I am aware that my light skin brings advantages and disadvantages. I was raised in a middle-class neighborhood, with a traditional family unit (my parents are still married), which I observed was atypical of many of my Latino peers in school. I do not have a Latina name, but I am bilingual in Spanish and English. In my younger years, I did not speak Spanish; I was a native English speaker, which distanced me from recognition as a Latina student. My bilingual abilities were developed during adolescence. Last, I was taught literacy very early in life because my mom was an elementary school teacher and later a librarian. I was always at the top of my class academically.

I entered a university as a traditional freshman, but owing to discomfort in the environment (because I did not identify with the student majority as a Latina student), I transferred to the local community college and reentered the university later. I hesitantly pursued applying to a doctoral program because of previous negative university experiences and other reasons, such as believing that my gender and ethnoracial and cultural background would not be welcomed in a program of advanced study at the predominantly White university. In the vein of stereotype threat, I have encountered signs that I am being judged according to a negative stereotype especially when others realize that I am Latina. I am also compelled to set the example for my children, who face deficit-framed microaggressions as Latino male students in elementary and secondary settings in the context of our state policies. My motivations to serve "the Other" as an educational leader are deeply rooted in social justice frameworks that overlap with my cultural identity and I consider the work my calling.

**Charita Johnson Stubbs:** I hold the position of assistant volleyball coach at my university and am completing a doctoral program and raising a family with my husband. I earned bachelor's and master's degrees at the same university and graduated from the Women's Coaches Academy. I am fluent in French, hold lifetime membership in Delta Sigma Theta sorority, and am devoted to my church. I am married with a young son and an adopted daughter from Haiti. I am a medium-brown-skinned Black female who grew up in an all-Black inner-city neighborhood in Cleveland, Ohio, with a lot of extended family always around. Out of high school, I earned an athletic scholarship and ventured into a new world that was predominantly White. Honors as a volleyball athlete included college all-conference and regional awards, two U.S. Olympic Festival team memberships, and a professional career in France. I have enjoyed employment mobility as I have held leadership positions as an executive director, athletic director, and volleyball coach for club and school teams, the U.S. National team that qualified for World Championships in Mexico, and coached major university teams.

My most challenging job was serving as a coach and I felt that I could not avoid negative stereotypes and experienced subtle forms of stigma,



microaggression, colorism, and stereotype threats. In doctoral studies [I have felt judged by] White professors . . . because of my hair and skin color.

**Irene Robles-Lopez:** My position is vice president for student development at a local community college campus. I am married with children as I pursue a doctoral degree at the university. I earned bachelor's and master's degrees in education and counseling, respectively. I am a medium-skinned Mexican American female who is bilingual and a fourth-generation American. I have lived in border cities in two southwestern states. My immediate family consists of my father, mother, and brother. My mother earned both her bachelor's and master's degrees while my brother and I were young. My father is a Vietnam veteran who attended college and recently retired from law enforcement. My parents served as role models to us as they both pursued higher education credentials while working and supporting the family. My father is an only child who grew up with his grandmother and mother. My mother's family included ten siblings and my grandparents.

My first awareness of colorism was seeing the way my mother was treated by my grandmother. My mother is the oldest female child in her family and her sister is two years younger but much lighter in skin complexion. My light-skinned aunt received preferential treatment and was described as the "pretty one." My mother, who is medium-skin-toned, was referred to as "*la prieta*," meaning the dark one. Due to the inter-racial and intra-racial colorism that my mother experienced, both she and my father made very strategic life choices and sacrifices to ensure that their children received a solid education in order to empower us in moving forward in life and overcome the complexities presented by colorism. Earning a doctorate degree is a dream for me and would repay the hard work and support my parents have provided throughout the years.

## Procedures

As researchers we share the supposition that personal engagement with the subject of colorism is the key to understanding the phenomenon in cultural and social places. We agreed on the trust needed in each other while sharing personal, sensitive, and vulnerable aspects of life experiences with colorism and agreed on conditions for confidentiality. We sought to analyze experiences and perceptions about colorism that are both conscious and unconscious. To do so, we mutually decided on the general direction of the research as informed by findings from the literature (Taylor et al., 2015). Our investigation started in a graduate course, continued after the class by amassing a comprehensive interdisciplinary literature review, and intensified in meetings as well as writings of our individual and collective narratives, which resulted in a collaborative analysis and interpretation of narratives over the last five months of work. Our individual and collective narratives (various word counts) were recorded in over 40 written notes and eight in-depth autobiographical papers. Overall, we logged over

63 hours of face-to-face meetings. All procedures occurred from January 2013 to December 2014. When sharing our stories, we used self-references and self-narratives—our individual voices—to place experiences within a social context. We recognized the influence of emotional memories and how they become invested in current experiences, whether in our families or at work. By taking a reflexive approach and analyzing our own subjective lived experiences before sharing them with fellow researchers for comparison, we opened ourselves to each other for further inquiry and cooperatively conducted preliminary and follow-up data analysis by sharing our writings and posing probing questions to each other. The data were analyzed in a three-phase process: preliminary exploratory analysis, shared open coding, and development of themes.

## Findings and Discussion

Although color bias confronts Mexican Americans and African Americans regularly, we documented some variations in family, educational, and academic employment experiences. The first emergent theme challenged the prevailing narrative regarding universal light skin privilege in families. In two of our three cases, we found that being light skinned did not automatically translate into favoritism with relatives. Rather, we documented generational shifts in attitudes and behaviors between older and younger relatives. The second theme focused on our perceptions of colorism during our compulsory schooling years. Last, employment in educational settings extended and reified many of the color-based perceptions that we developed during our K-12 years.

### Family

All three participants recalled vivid instances of color prejudice within our immediate and extended families. Although available accounts generally attest to preferences for light skin among Hispanics and Blacks, we found that "home is where the hurt is" for children across the color spectrum (Freeman, 2012, p. 193). Similar to Black families (Golden, 2005), Robles-Lopez remembered:

I learned that my mother and friends had the same views and unintentionally contributed to my perspective on beauty. . . . my mother . . . would often tell me to cover my face and arms from the sun so I would not get burned or dark.

And Stubbs remarked:

We used to make jokes about the ashiness that was stereotypical for brown people after being in water. While we worked hard to never

go near water without lotion to use immediately afterward, I worked harder never to get my hair wet unless I was shampooing it. The texture of my hair has always been an issue for me because straight hair was and is still [a] “required look” for access to [some] social and professional opportunities, although I must admit I no longer “obey” the “standard.”

Through family encounters, the dynamics of colorism were both conscious and implicit where preferences for light skin were more common among older relatives and different attitudes surfaced among relatives who were closer to our generation such as siblings. Grandparents’ explicit comments and behavior revealed attitudes that favored light skin tones over medium-complexion hues, as Robles-Lopez perceived:

My . . . grandmother’s preference for the lighter siblings was evident even in the way that my grandmother treated us, her grandchildren . . . My cousins would receive verbal praise for the slightest accomplishment while we would receive a nod or inauthentic smile from my grandmother.

Although social scientists regularly point to specific physical elements in which colorism manifests, our analysis suggested the existence of a hierarchy of physical features within Mexican American and African American families. Specific to female beauty, our families emphasized hair (texture and color) as the second most salient characteristic after skin color. Traits such as eye color and body shape received comparably less attention. Stubbs even related that she was often told “it was important to not go out in public without greasing and brushing my kinky hair at least 100 times.” Several authors have outlined the significance of hair differences among African-descended people (Byrd & Tharps, 2014); however, our findings underscore the significance of hair in other cultural communities. Other remembrances point to generational shifts as siblings or other family members who were close to our own generation embraced physical features that were more typical of our ethnoracial groups. As a light-complexioned woman of color, Desjardin was keenly aware of how traditional ideas about light skin tones were inverted. She shared a poignant memory that raised questions about identity owing to her light-skinned appearance:

Related to facial phenotype, I was always the odd one out since I was “so white” and did not tan. Therefore, my older siblings told me I was adopted and said things like, “Why do you think you don’t even look like any of us?” My olive-skinned Mexican American family members and older siblings had almond-shaped brown eyes, brown hair, and tanned easily. I recall these phenotype differences being both a source of confusion (why was I so different?) and shame, as I did not want to stand apart from my ethnic identity in such a way.

Desjardin continued by noting that early socialization regarding phenotypic features resulted in making choices about how she presented herself to peers, stating that, “I had to choose whether or not to fit in with my ethnic culture, which on one hand meant lightening, perming and teasing my hair, using tanning lotions, and wearing my makeup a certain way to fit into the Latina norms at school.” Stubbs also pointed out that in her family:

. . . my brother was the lightest person in my immediate family and he was nicknamed—light bright.” [A relative] used to tell my brother he was lighter than everyone else because he was a—test tube baby.” Contrastingly, family members made an effort to attest that—being dark was not a bad thing” by continually saying things like,—the darker the berry, the sweeter the juice.”

Despite different perspectives on color, all three of our families made concerted efforts to equip us with skills that would protect us from color-based aggressions and roadblocks outside of our families. Examples included positive reinforcement of natural beauty, intelligence, and pride in our cultures. For instance, Robles-Lopez shared how her mother challenged skin-color discrimination with positive support:

In order to counteract my grandmother’s treatment, my mother always made it a point to verbally affirm our worth, beauty, and intelligence in order for us not to be impacted negatively.

Each of us received messages early in childhood and into adulthood about skin tone, hair, and other physical features. Our experiences with colorism in the family occasionally marginalized and stigmatized each of us as the “Other” and a member of an “out group.”

### *Education Institutions*

We each attended integrated K-12 schools where colorism surfaced in our schooling. As discussed by Hunter (2016), many teachers exhibited implicit biases when making helpful comments, smiling more, and interacting favorably with White and lighter-skinned students in comparison to darker-skinned students. Part of Desjardin’s consternation originated with her perception that teachers’ inclinations were tied to her light skin tone and Anglo features, including speaking English without an accent. She reflected:

Academically, I was always at the top of my class because my mom was an elementary school teacher and later a librarian, and I was taught literacy very early. . . . my [good] experiences [in school] were atypical to what an “average” Latina school-age girl might experience, which I truly believe was because my teachers did not realize I was Mexican

American. I only had two teachers who were of color in all of my seven years of primary school. I attribute my early educational experiences and treatment to White privilege, as I was perceived to be White. This is not the identity I wanted to have.

Peer-group dynamics, moreover, often made school situations exasperating. According to Robles-Lopez:

In order to thrive in my new school [when I was growing up], I quickly adapted and learned skills that enabled me to communicate effectively in order to relate to my classmates and teachers. Because I am not light-skinned, I had to work hard to earn others' respect [so that] I was accepted and viewed as one of "them." Simultaneously, I witnessed the marginalization of darker-skinned Latino classmates because they were not able to assimilate into the educational setting. Students made fun of other students that were not like them. Students mocked and put them down based on skin color and ethnicity. I naively was hesitant to speak up because I was afraid the taunting would be aimed at me. After several incidents of this, I finally spoke up and as a result became the recipient of unwarranted backlash by my classmates . . . I was no longer accepted, viewed as one of them, considered not to be their "friend"; thus, our friendship became nonexistent.

We also experienced student friendship patterns in which lighter-skinned peers were befriended, picked as playmates, invited to "hang out," and date. As Stubbs recalled:

All of the girls in school who got the boyfriends were lighter-skinned and had long hair. This is when I first noticed that the "blacker the berry" did not equate to the sweeter the juice for me . . . I remember having a best friend, and our summer goal was to find a boyfriend for each other. I clearly remember the boy I found for her saying to me, "You will lose the challenge because you are not as cute as your friend. Look at how light she is, and look at her hair." I was hurt, and it is something that has stayed with me.

Within desegregated schools, we also felt a pressure to fit with accepted beauty norms. For the Latina participants, the pervasiveness of White standards of beauty was intense as Robles-Lopez summarized:

When I entered high school is when I focused on the beauty of phenotype features. I tried my best to fit into the "norm" of what was defined as beauty at the time. I would use bronzer to try to make the sides of my nose look narrower. My body type was curvy with big legs and wide hips. So, I would purposely wear clothes to minimize the size of my derriere and hips.

Stubbs's experiences as an African American were informed by dual standards of general society as well as expectations within her ethnoracial group. For example, it was important to "stay in style" by adopting hairstyles that were popular among within-group circles:

I remember going from a jheri curl to nappy girl. There was a sense of acceptance that came from having hair that allowed me to be in the . . . crowd based on hair. I never fit in with those who had "good hair;" they were treated like gold. I remember all the boys liking them because of their hair and they were just about always fair skinned.

In predominately White athletic settings, however, Stubbs perceived "gut feelings" of being devalued because of phenotype features, reflecting that, "I knew I was different from the majority of my teammates, White and Black, because of my dark skin tone and Afrocentric features—broad nose, curly hair and thick lips." Thus, collective notions about beauty may be mediated by cultural persuasions within and outside of ethnoracial groups. Although Hispanics are not immune from culture-specific tendencies, cultural notions may be operationalized differently. For example, Desjardin's encounters with in-group colorism centered on perceptions of language skills, namely fluency in Spanish and she recalled this situation unfolding at school:

During high school I vividly recall the social cliques forming, and this was when girls I had grown up with since elementary school, who spoke Spanish, were specifically excluding me from their social groups, even though they knew I was Latina because I wasn't "Mexican enough" for them. Not only did I not look like the norm, but also my language (speaking "proper English" without an accent) further separated me. Being of light skin tone and [being] perceived as not able to speak the language [Spanish] [were] a stigma . . . of not being "Mexican enough."

Language can be important to ethnic identity and may signal racial affiliation and social categorization. Being able to speak Spanish, thus, may be a marker for 'authentic Mexicanness' where participation in cultural practices may influence perceptions of group membership (Sanchez & Chavez, 2010). Given that culture and skin color are often used to "define" difficult-to-categorize light-skinned Hispanics (Wilton, Sanchez, & Chavez, 2013), language status is a critical area to investigate.

#### *Academic Employment Experiences*

Our experiences with skin-color discrimination revolved around situations where we perceived microaggressions. Being held to seemingly different standards is one way that we viewed our experiences as being set apart from others. Ranging from feeling "under more scrutiny" to navigating racially-tense

or uncomfortable scenarios, we have encountered nagging experiences that engendered feelings of wanting to enact transformative change as related to promoting fair treatment. As Robles-Lopez summarized, "In my everyday work as an administrator, it is my responsibility to advocate for students by being the voice of those who feel they have none and providing support as they proceed on their educational journey." Our collective commitment to social justice is inextricably linked to our own experiences and we are concerned that inattention to colorism will allow the problem to continue infecting educational spaces. Without deliberate guidance, other students of color and colleagues may have their educational goals muted or derailed. As Stubbs said,

I thought it could never happen to me, an accomplished Black female with potential for greater job opportunities in the future. Truth be told, when the 'isms' struck I was defenseless . . . The most traumatizing experience I had was when [my team had a losing streak] and a caricature of me [was printed in the campus newspaper] but I refused to quit.

Unfortunately, the educational experiences of people of color are regularly shaped by discrimination related to gender, ethnicity, race, and color.

### Concluding Thoughts

In our collaborative effort, we bonded around common experiences and uncovered subtleties in the many oppressions that colorism unleashes. We learned that it is not easy to talk about how one's phenotypicality features are viewed so negatively even though we have claimed beauty and pride in our presentation of self in everyday life. Many of our differences were obvious, such as skin-tone shades, culture, language, and experiences. As we explored our histories, however, the process of confronting discriminatory memories and current realities led us to engage bell hooks's (2000) calls for transformation. As she writes,

Women of color must confront our absorption of white supremacist beliefs, "internalized racism," which may lead us to feel self-hate, to vent anger and rage at injustice at one another rather than at oppressive forces, to hurt and abuse one another, or to lead one ethnic group to make no effort to communicate with another. Often women of color from varied ethnic groups have learned to resent and hate one another, or to be competitive with one another. Often Asian, Latina, or Native American Indian groups find they can bond with whites by hating blacks. Black people respond to this by perpetuating racist stereotypes and images of these ethnic groups. It becomes a vicious cycle. Divisions between women of color will not be eliminated until we assume responsibility for uniting (not solely on the basis of resisting racism) to learn about our cultures, to

share our knowledge and skills, and to gain strength from our diversity. We need to do more research and writing about the barriers that separate us and the ways we can overcome such separation.

(hooks, 2000, p. 57)

Our collaborative circle illustrates the power of building understanding through cross-ethnoracial sharing. Educational leaders who seriously wish to eradicate colorism should adopt the model outlined in this chapter to facilitate dialogue and, more importantly, clarify segments of regressive educational life.

### Note

1. We self-identify as Mexican Americans and Blacks as well as our skin-color tones. We will interchangeably use the terms Mexican American, Latina/o, and Hispanic as well as Black and African American, as reflected in our narratives and the literature.

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