The impact of mestizaje ideology: A program proposal on colorism in latinx communities

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Afro-Latinx people are largely ignored within global media, historical context, and academic discourse. Ultimately, this erasure is a byproduct of the persistent nature of colorism within US racial dynamics. Colorism is the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts (Hunter, 2007). These privileges can be seen within areas of income, education, housing, mental health, and marriage. The concept of colorism is directly related to the larger system of racism operated within the United States and is historical rooted within white supremacy and European colonization projects. Little research has been conducted on the within-group differences among the Latinx population, particularly regarding skin color and related racial features (Adames, Chavez-Dueñas & Organista, 2016). However, a study Haywood (2017) found that because of colorism ideologies, many Afro-Latinx collegians commented on receiving negative messages about their phenotype as children from their family members as well as experiencing social exclusion within academic environments and constantly having to prove their "Latinidad" authenticity to their peers in college.

Colorism is a pervasive issue that hinders community collectiveness within and across communities of color. Through the ideology of *mestizaje* (race-mixing), Latinx-identified individuals have been socialized to adopt a post-racial worldview which allows one to deny "the power of structural racism that lead individuals to believe that race/skin color in inconsequential in people's daily existence" (Chavez-Dueñas, Adames & Organista, 2014). In this essay, the effects of colorism that plague the Latinx community will be discussed in addition to potential programmatic efforts that can be implemented within institutions of higher education that will

begin to challenge the prevalence of *mestizaje* ideology and foster support and inclusion of Afro-Latinx students in education.

Literature Review

Mestizaje Racial Ideology Formation

Colorism within the Latinx community is embedded within the colonial practices and ideologies of the Spanish who devalued the culture, language, religion, and phenotypic features of the indigenous and African people (Haywood, 2017). During the colonial period, the Spanish created a caste system based on skin color and facial features which allowed the colonial-settlers to uphold a hierarchical system of race classification with the Spaniards and their descendants strategically occupying the top of the pyramid. Such a stratification system was designed to allow Spaniards to hold and control political, social, and economic power at the cost of impoverishing indigenous and African groups (Chavez-Dueñas et. al, 2014).

The concept of *mestizaje* was created by Spanish conquistadors as a feeble effort to deny the legacy of inequality established before the postcolonial era. *Mestizaje*, an ideology where everyone was deemed to be of mixed descent, was one of the main strategies the Spaniards used to deemphasize privileges associated with phenotypically white characteristics (Chavez-Dueñas , et. al, 2014). The descendants of the Spanish colonizers believed that over time, *mestizaje* ideology would lead to the disappearance of indigenous and African cultures from Latin American society; and in some regard, this holds true. Consequently, Afro-descendants and indigenous people were socialized to buy into this idea of racial mixing and did so as a weak attempt to deny their racist ideologies and “erase” the public discourse about their inferiority (Chavez-Dueñas , et. al, 2014).

Mestizaje was encouraged, valorized, and celebrated because it was viewed as a "progressive process in which black and indigenous people would be integrated into a mestizo nation that was moving towards whiteness" (Haywood, 2017, p. 762). Lighter skin, light colored hair, and blue eyes were valued and praised by the Spaniards and as a result, those features became desirable for the colonized peoples as they internalized the dominant colonial ideology. Essentially, Haywood (2017) notes this lead to the development of *mestizaje* racial ideologies (MRIs) which is the "historical socialization of Latinx [peoples] that formed and continues to maintain the denial, deflection, and minimization of the skin color hierarchy" (p. 762). The author adds that MRIs are a racial project meant to sustain the fundamental and structural institutions of white supremacy. Thus, if we are unable to deconstruct the problematic racial ideologies enveloped within Latinx history and culture, then we will be perpetuating the legitimization of the "empire" rather than disrupting the normative Eurocentric ethical discourse that is required to begin liberating the colonized minds of People of Color (De La Torre, 2013).

Skin Color Privilege

The neglect of addressing the issues of colorism and the adoption of MRIs has preserved the colonial legacy of economic and social caste within the Latinx community as it relates to present day. Skin color stratification has allowed for lighter-skinned Latinx peoples to be favored for economic advancement, educational attainment, housing options, improved mental health, and attractability. Research has shown that Latinx individuals who identified as white earned about $5000 more per year than Latinx people who identified as black (Hunter, 2007). In employment, it is also suggested that colorism can potentially affect negotiations over salary and benefits. Additionally, feminist scholars have argued that the idea of beauty matters for women within the job market. Hunter (2007) states that "attractiveness" is a cultural construct influenced

by racial aesthetics. As such, lighter-skinned applicants are seen as holding ideal beauty features comparatively to their darker counterparts and will likely professional benefit from their perceived physical attractiveness.

Furthermore, skin tone is an important aspect in defining beauty and beauty is an important characteristic for women (Hunter, 2007). Lighter skin can be used as a form of social capital for women to "marry up;" lighter-skinned women are shown to marry spouses with higher levels of education, income, and occupational prestige than their darker-skinned counterparts. The phenomenon allows light-skinned people to trade their high status of skin tone for the high status of their spouses (Hunter, 2007). However, the valorization of white beauty is not only centralized within the United States, but is rather a global phenomenon. Hunter (2007) comments on the fanatic uses of skin bleaching creams to achieve a lighter complexion in countries like Saudi Arabia, Brazil, and Uganda while also noting how many Asian countries are leading the way in plastic surgery operations, and nose job procedures are a common high school graduation gift among the elite in Mexico City.

Studies have also shown that Afro-Latinas report the highest levels of depressive symptoms compared to European Americans and African Americans (Adames, et. al, 2016). The literature suggests that this psychological distress is because individuals with darker-skin and less European-looking features experience more racial stigma and discrimination. Additionally, research shows that lighter-skinned Mexican Americans complete more years of schooling than darker-skinned Mexican Americans even when their family backgrounds are similar (Hunter, 2007), This is a result of teachers internalizing hierarchal prejudice based on skin color which causes them to have higher academic expectations for their lighter-skinned students. As such, by

ignoring the prominence of light-skin privilege, we are maintaining racial hierarchy and oppressive outcomes of Afro-Latinx livelihood and existence.

Within-Group Racial Discrimination

The pride in which the Latinx population take in being enlightened about race relations as a mixed people allows the analysis and conversation of intra-group anti-blackness and horizontal hostility to be readily ignored as a community. Haywood (2017) found that in addition to experiencing racism and colorism within their own immediate families, Afro-Latinx students shared how they faced exclusion that they perceived to be based on their race among their peers in college. One of the participants in the study expressed how light-skinned Latinx students at his institution were not interested in developing friendships with him which made him feel uncomfortable in Latinx dominated spaces; from this, he sought out cultivating relationships with African American students. The example highlights the colorism that ensues within Latinx spaces and how Afro-Latinx students must negotiate their identity and find alternative communities that are more culturally inclusive.

Often, many Afro-Latinx students are questioned about their Latinx ethnic authenticity. Haywood (2017) suggests that Latinx authenticity is "an unstable construct informed by the socially acceptable markers of Latinidad" (p.773). These markers are based on an individual's nationality, Spanish fluency, race, and geographic identity; as such, the dominant white majority influences discourses of Latinx authenticity rather than those identifying within that culture and community. In Haywood's (2017) article, multiple participants noted having to prove their Latinidad authenticity to peers due to their lack of fluency in the Spanish language. From this, one can see that due to their limited Spanish proficiency and Afrocentric features, many Afro-Latinx people are placed outside the bounds of their cultural communities.

Within-group hostility also emerges through the falsehood of using Latino as a pan-ethnic label to encompass all cultures and nationalities within this population of peoples. Chavez-Dueñas et. al (2014) states that positing the use of a pan-ethnic label "obscures the realities of darker-skinned Latinx [people] and those who have less European looking phenotypes...it also renders the privilege conferred to lighter-skinned Latinx [people] as invisible" (p. 16). If we cannot even begin to denote the differences in ethnic identities veiled under the Latinx pan-ethnic label, then we are allowing MRIs and colorism to continue operating within this community unchallenged. Ultimately, this perpetuates the social isolation and exclusion of Afro-Latinx people within the Latinx community and fosters the propensity for intra-group hostility to ensue.

Program Proposal

Institutional Setting

The proposed program will take place at Iowa State University (ISU) which is a public, land-grant research institution in Ames, IA. Iowa State is a predominantly white institution with an enrollment of 12.9% minority students reported in spring 2018 (Minority Summary, Iowa State University, 2018). Despite having a low percentage, Hispanic/Latino-identified students are the largest minority body within the university. This shows a need for programming targeted towards this population. Also, ISU resides within a politically-conservative climate in a sea of whiteness. Post-racial ideologies dominating societal discourse coupled with the heightened anti-immigrant rhetoric fervently practiced by our elected officials, essentially has created an inconsistency in the ways this institution participates in conversations about race and racism. Leading colorblind racism scholars have noted that individuals that embody this ideology have "distorted or conveniently used colorblindness as a means of color denial" (Chavez-Dueñas et.

al, 2014). This ideology is shown as a dominant narrative within white culture and is reminiscent of *mestizaje* rooted within Latinx culture. To this end, the institution is operating within a realm of systemic racial aggression while also upholding a false narrative of functioning in a post-racial era. This paradox complicates the ways in which ISU can address issues of racism.

Additionally, the campus is highly siloed in their departmental efforts. Many multicultural events targeted towards Latinx-identified students utilize the problematic pan-ethnic label as an attempt to address and supports all cultures and nationalities that are supposed to fall under this identity category. Program efforts for black-identified students mostly are done without the idea of Afro-Latinx students in mind. In turn, programmatic efforts focused on bridging solidarity amongst groups of color let alone deconstructing the inter-group hostility that occurs within these communities from the legacy of colorism, is mute. Though, identifying as a student of color within a PWI can make one feel hyper-aware of their own racial identity. From this, Iowa State could serve as an ideal location to begin having conversations about colorism, privilege, and anti-black racism, specifically in communities of color.

Program Implementation and Objectives

As the research suggests, many Latinx people were socialized to adopt a *mestizaje* ideology which allows for beliefs and practices based on colorism to flourish within this community without challenge or discussion. Chavez-Dueñas et al. (2014) states that "the majority of us are not socialized to reflect and deliberate on our areas of privilege, which can lead to difficulties seeing, acknowledging, discussing, and studying the consequences of within-group stigma and discrimination" (p. 18). In turn, we cannot begin to dismantle colorism within the Latinx community if we are unable to have a genuine conversation about our own skin color privilege. Many occasions when skin color becomes part of the conversation, the concept is

readily dismissed or the conversation is held in a superficial manner leading to a shallow and fragmented understanding of colorism (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). Often, feelings and attitudes of discomfort, shame, and guilt will overpower these necessary conversations which enables the concept of colorism to be sustained without ever meaningfully being dissected.

From this, ISU would benefit from creating an inter-group dialogue workshop which will allow for communities of color to "deliberately reflect and engage in dialogue about within-group differences that lead to privilege for some at the expense of others" (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014). The workshop will be titled *Let's Talk About Colorism! The Effects of Mestizaje on Afro-Latinx Students.* The objectives of the workshop are to: (a) define colorism; (b) discuss the historical significance of MRI in Latinx culture; (c) analyze the implications one's own skin color and phenotypic features; and (d) brainstorm ideas to support Afro-Latinx students in their identity. The program will begin with a set of photographs of different individuals hanging on the wall for the audience to observe. The pictures will be arranged from lightest to darkest skin color. After a moment of examination, the audience will be asked to guess which individuals in the photos they would characterize as being Latinx. One of the facilitators will ask audience members to justify their assumptions.

This beginning activity will spark initial interest and group participation while providing the foundation for the facilitators to lead into presenting on the historical significance of *mestizaje*, Spanish colonization, and how it relates to the onslaught of colorism today. Participants will proceed to complete another activity adapted from Anti-oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA, 2017) that is meant to encourage them to deconstruct their early learnings and socialization of blackness (Appendix A). The group will begin by writing down their earliest recollections of positive and negative messages they received about blackness

followed by them dividing into pairs or triads to share about their experiences. The facilitators will then moderate a large-group debrief with flipchart paper where they will record the negative and positive messages about blackness discussed in their previous pairs. The program will close with the group thinking of ways to continue deconstructing colorism within their own spaces of influence followed by a short debrief by facilitators.

Program Logistics

This workshop should not take any longer than 2 hours and would ideally be held during the school week during mid-to-late afternoon. The event will have a sign-up requirement as to track attendance and prepare for activity alterations based on student numbers. Optimal location for this program would be within the Multicultural Center at the Memorial Union or the Margaret Schloss Women's Center. There should be 2 facilitators to coordinate this event and preferably they would identify as Latinx individuals; if not, the people that identify as non-Latinx should share their positionality with the audience during their introductions. Evaluations will be conducted via discussion questions asked by the facilitators alongside a short paper survey to measure program objectives. Debrief questions will include: (a) is there anything you learned?; (b) how are you physically/emotionally feeling after completing this workshop?; (c) how can you use your skin color privilege to mindfully open spaces for Afro-Latinx students feel more included?; and (d) what are some ways you have benefitted or been oppressed from *mestizaje* ideology or colorism practices?

Funding for this program is minimal and would only require a budget for light snacks and refreshments. This funding could potentially be secured through a proposal made to The Division of Diversity and Inclusion at Iowa State. Alternatively, gaining cross-collaborative sponsorships for this event could also salvage the potential cost of food and beverages. Possible sponsors

include: the Multicultural Students Affairs office, college multicultural liaison officers, Lambda Theta Alpha Latin Sorority/Fraternity, Inc., and various student organizations such as Latinx Student Initiatives, the Puerto Rican Student Association, Pan-Caribbean Community, and the Brazilian Student Organization. Likewise, advertisement for this event should be sent to all of these clubs and departments to publicize to students. Additionally, this workshop should be held during Latinx Heritage Month as a core event.

Conclusion

To begin to challenge the issue of colorism within minoritized groups, we must start with having an honest conversation about our socialization of racial identity and skin color. Seeing as the student of color population at ISU is significantly low compared to their white counterparts, one could argue that discussing colorism is imperative to strengthen community ties within minoritized groups. Although, it is evident that it is already challenging to influence Latinx students to talk about colorism within their own communities, let alone gain administrative support of this endeavor at a college institution. As such, it would be strategically beneficial for program coordinators of this workshop to appeal to university administration based on facts, data, and potential impact for students.

Seeing as there is little research done on Afro-Latinx students or colorism within the Latinx community, this program could help foster that interest or growth with that research. Additionally, Latinx-identified students embody the largest statistic for students of color enrollment at Iowa State; with this, programming centered on creating inclusive spaces for these students and their Afro-Latinx peers can lead to improved campus climate surveys. Additionally, these concepts are largely unaddressed within the academic curriculum thus showing a need to incorporate this learning outside of the classroom. It is also important for program facilitators to

have already established their sponsorship connections before approaching administration as to show them that there is wide support of this program across campus.

By having a program that addresses issues of colorism specifically within the Latinx community, we are rendering "the experience of individuals of indigenous and African descent more visible that are still ignored within [these] communities" (Chavez-Dueñas et al., 2014, p. 18). We must begin to deconstruct our own skin color and phenotypic privileges that if gone unchallenged, maintain the structural inequalities of racial hierarchy that affect communities of color. Hernández (2003) comments how this racial hierarchy will never be "eviscerated so long as [Latinx people] and the scholars that discuss their realities ignore the existence of racial prejudice within the community and treat the concept of Blackness as foreign to the [Latinx] identity" (p. 157). Colorism is only one manifestation of a larger racial project (Hunter, 2007); therefore, addressing the rich roots of indigenous and Afro-descendants within Latinx history, we are making the first steps in building resistance to social stratification based on ethnicity, race, and skin color while aiding in the disruption of white supremacy ideals held within higher education.

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Appendix A

ANTI-BLACK RACISM: EARLY LEARNINGS AND SOCIALIZATION
FACILITATOR GUIDE: HOW TO USE THIS HANDOUT

Recommended length of time: 45-70 minutes

Goal: Reflect on and begin to deconstruct our socialized and internalized beliefs about Blackness.

What you will need:
- Two sheets of butcher paper & markers
- Anti-Black Racism: Early Learnings and Socialization Handout (enough copies for each participant)

Introduce the exercise. (5 minutes)
Outline the steps below. Note that we are not born with racial bias; we start learning these things as babies. The bias that we learn at an early age often becomes part of our worldview, which sometimes makes it hard to notice.

Journaling. (5-10 minutes)
Ask participants to spend 5-10 minutes writing down their responses to the discussion questions on the handout.

Sharing. (10-15 minutes)
Divide the group into pairs or triads. Ask people to share what they want to about their experiences, along with anything else that feels important.

Reflect. (2 minutes)
Ask people to take a minute to themselves to reflect: Is there anything you learned? Any important takeaways?

Whole group debrief. (15-30 minutes)
Put up two sheets of flipchart paper. One one, record two categories of information: positive messages about Blackness and negative messages about Blackness. On the other, record key takeaways.

Potential Debrief Questions:
- How was that?
- Are there things you want to share with the group? (a-ha moments, things that others may learn from)
- What messages did you receive?
- What did you notice or learn?
- Which of these messages is more often reinforced? (How? By whom?)
- How does this compare to what/when you learned about white people?

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Appendix A Contd.

ANTI-BLACK RACISM: EARLY LEARNINGS AND SOCIALIZATION

Instructions for Participants
Try and find at least one memory for each category. Note your age and something to help you remember the moment, such as a phrase, drawing, symbol, or journal passage.

Early/first memories you have of learning positive things about Blackness & Black people (from family, media, friends, teachers, etc.)	Early/first memories you have of learning negative things about Blackness & Black people (from family, media, friends, teachers, etc.)

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