

## **BREAKING BARRIERS: UNDERSTANDING MENTAL HEALTH IN AFRO-LATINO COMMUNITIES**

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### **Abstract**

This study addresses a significant gap in the existing literature, examining the phenomenon of racial traversing among Afro-Latinx individuals in the United States, with a specific focus on self-perception and mental wellness. While finding validation within one's own cultural group can serve as a buffer against negative experiences and their impact on mental health, it does not entirely negate the broader societal dismissal of one's racial identity and its profound effects on self-perception and overall mental well-being. The Latinx community is a rich tapestry of diverse racial and cultural backgrounds, where in Latin American nations, individuals primarily identify with their nationality, irrespective of race. In stark contrast, the U.S. employs labels that can create divisions, categorizing all Latinx individuals under broader terms like "Latinos," "brown people," or "Hispanics." This classification further fragments the group into sub-categories based on race, including the distinct classification of Afro-Latinx, encompassing individuals with African heritage originating from Latin American countries, as well as those with mixed African and mestizo ancestry. Here, mestizo refers to individuals with mixed Native American Indian and white European lineage.

In the United States, these identity markers not only serve as labels, but also function as tools of oppression, historically manifested through practices like slavery, segregation, and racialized policing. Such patterns of oppression are also evident in the experiences of Latinx individuals, manifesting in racial profiling, racialized policing, and mass deportations. Given that Afro-Latinx individuals in the U.S. hold connections, whether racial or cultural, to both groups, it is conceivable that they may share the burdens of oppression from both. Moreover, due to their intricate interplay of racial, ethnic, and cultural identities, they may also undergo a distinct form of oppression that is tailored to their multifaceted backgrounds.

**Keywords:** Afro-Latinx, Racial Traversing, Self-Perception, Mental Wellness, Oppression Experiences

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### **1. Introduction**

There is a vacancy in the literature that explores the racial traversing of Afro-Latinx people in the United States, specifically encompassing self-perception and mental wellness. While intra-cultural recognition and validation can mitigate adverse experiences and its impact on mental health—it does not however remove the larger societal dismissal of one's racial identity and its impact on self-perception and overall mental health wellness. The Latinx community is an extremely diverse community of people of various racial and cultural intersections and in Latin American countries, individuals typically identify themselves based on their nationality regardless of their race with labels like "Mexican" and "Cuban" (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016). In the United States however, a country known to use labels in order to create division, there is an imposed system that categorizes all Latinx people under the umbrella of

labels such as “Latinos” “brown people” or “Hispanics” (Taylor, Lopez, Martínez, & Velasco, 2016). In order to further divide this group, Latinos are then subjected to additional labels that create sub-categories based on race. One of these subcategories is Afro-Latinx which refers to individuals of African ancestry who have some origin from a Latin American country as well as those who have descended from both African and mestizo ancestries. Mestizo refers to individuals of mixed Native American Indian and white European (specifically Spaniard) ancestry (Gonzalez-Barrera, 2015).

In the United States, not only are identity markers used to label and categorize, but they also function as a way to oppress people (Whitten et al, 2001). Historically, there has been a great deal of oppression of African Americans through slavery, segregation, and racialized policing (Whitten, Norman, Corr, & Rachel, 2001). We also see the prevalence of oppression towards Latinx people carried out in several ways such as racial profiling, racialized policing, and mass deportation (Nichols, LeBrón, & Pedraza, 2018). Since Afro-Latinx people in the United States are either racially or culturally connected to both groups, it is possible that they may share both experiences of oppression. It is also possible that based on their intersecting racial/ethnic/cultural identities, they may have experienced a more unique form of oppression that is specific to their multi-cultural and multi-ethnic identities. With oppression being so embedded in United States culture, this article explore how oppression has manifested within smaller social systems such as social groups and familial groups within the Afro-Latinx community. In addition, this article will explore the intersectionality and will highlight the differences in experiences within the Afro-Latinx community which often goes unnoticed and unrecognized by the dominant culture. The goal of this study was to explore the racial experiences among Afro-Latinx people, specifically those living in the United States, and determine how their racial experiences have influenced how they view themselves (i.e., self-esteem, self-concept, and racialesteem) as well as the impacts on their overall mental health and well-being. For the purpose of this article selfperception will encompass self-esteem, self-concept and racial-esteem. This study is essential to the field of human services because through gaining an understanding of the experiences that Afro-Latinx people are facing one can begin to create resources and culturally relevant interventions that best serve this population. Since Afro-Latinx people comprise a large fraction (24%) of the Latinx population in the United States (Lopez & Gonzalez-Barrera, 2016), it is important that experts in the helping professions understand the intricacies in the experiences of this population. There is an insufficient amount of published empirical research available that has examined this very concept.

Based on the complexities in the lived experiences of Afro-Latinx people, one might suggest several factors that would influence an Afro-Latinx individual’s mental health and overall sense of self. Some of these factors are oppressive messages delivered through racial and cultural microaggressions, connectedness to Latino culture and/or African/African American culture, societal pressures, systemic oppression, geographical elements, and physical attributes. This study takes a close look at some of these factors and explores some of the ways in which they show up in the lives of Afro-Latinx people.

Latinx people comprise a large fraction (17.8%) of the United States population according to the US Census Bureau (2017). In many areas of public discourse, such as news media, the term „Latino/a“ is used exclusively to describe individuals of mestizo/a ancestry. The experience of the Afro-Latinx person

in the United States is often untold or otherwise reduced to the single story of other groups such as African Americans. Busey (2015) developed a strong argument for the inclusion of Afro-Latinx history in school curriculums, stating that the true stories about actual people could create a better understanding of culture and race for students. When taking a closer look at AfroLatinx people and the factors that have influenced their lived experiences, it is likely that one might notice distinctions and similarities to the experiences of African Americans and mestizo/a Latinx people. This research examines the experiences of Afro-Latinx people in three different categories and isolates some of the factors that may contribute to one's self-perception as it pertains to race. The first category being examined is the ways in which skin color, hair texture, and other physical features could impact one's experiences. The second category being looked at is how culturally connected one is through knowledge and use of language, customs, and traditions. The third category looks at one's social experiences and power/privilege dynamics and examines how those factors impact their experiences with social and systemic oppression, self-perception, and overall mental health.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Physical Appearance and Self Perception**

In many cultures physical appearance can strongly impact individuals' racial experiences. Traits like hair texture, skin color, and other physical characteristics are often viewed as either desirable or undesirable. AraujoDawson, Quiros, & Santiago-Rivera (2014) examined nine Latina women's experiences with their families' teachings of cultural competence. One of the major trends in the narratives of the nine women were the negative social outcomes experienced by those that most physically embody African ancestry such as darker skin color, kinkier hair, and other dominant physical attributes.

Adames, Chavez-Dueñas, Organista, Brown, & Ronald (2016) found that individuals with darker skin have a higher likelihood of experiencing many negative outcomes such as distressed mental health, difficulty with racial group identification, and less access to resources. According to Faught & Hunter (2012) "for African Americans and Latinos, skin color is a significant predictor of many social and economic stratification variables including income, education, housing, occupational status, spousal status, poverty rates, criminal justice sentencing, and rates of depression." Hair texture is another physical characteristic that contributes to how one is perceived and treated in social contexts. In a documentary film titled "*Good Hair*" produced by Chris Rock, the current hair styling industry for black women is explored and images of what is considered acceptable and desirable for African American women's hair in the United States is discussed (Good Hair, 2009). The documentary tackles common issues that are faced by African American women in society based on characteristics of their hair. With the negative ideologies that surround individuals of African ancestry, it is important that people of Afro-Latinx decent are able to see positive Afro-Latinx representation in media, politics, and school. Although the level of representation is disproportionate to other ethnic/racial groups, Goin (2016) highlighted three popular Afro-Latina actresses and defined each of them as occupying a space of "Marginal Latinidad" which refers to those that do not match the normal depiction of Latinx people in a monolithic lens while also carrying influences of "blackness". Goin (2016) suggests that being able to

view positive figures and portrayals of Afro-Latinx people is a major step towards combating some of the negative ideologies that exist in the Latinx community.

With regard to race, colorism is an issue that has affected many racial/ethnic groups. In the Asian community, pale light skin is viewed as a highly attractive physical trait and as a reflection of those of a higher social status (Dixon & Telles, 2017). In the Latinx community, light skin is viewed more favorably as it is an indication to many that they contain a higher percentage of Spanish ancestry rather than indigenous ancestry. In the African American community, there is an ongoing discussion about how higher social status is assigned to individuals with lighter shades of skin dating back to the era of slavery in the United States. In an experiment called the “Clark Doll Experiment,” young children were asked a series of questions that described a person as “good,” “pretty,” and “nice”; each child was asked to choose the doll that they believed matched the description (Branch & Newcombe, 1986). A vast majority of the children associated all the good traits with the white doll and all of the bad traits with the black doll. This experiment highlighted how issues of colorism and racism are manifested and internalized in the psyches of children starting at a very young age.

## **2.2. Cultural Connectivity and Self Perception**

Although there has been research done on racism, ethnicity and mental health there has not been research explicitly focusing on Afro-Latinx individuals experience with race and self-perception (Gary, 2005; Okazaki, 2009; Vega, & Rumbaut, 1991). When examining the factors that contributes to one’s sense of self (i.e. self-perception, self-esteem, racial esteem) as it pertains to race, we must assess the impact that one’s cultural connectivity has on them. Afro-Latinx people embody a mix of two or more distinct cultures. If an individual identifies more with one aspect of their racial/ethnic identity than the other(s) and practices more cultural customs of one culture more than the other(s), it may be likely that the individual will racially self-identify with that ethnic identification. According to CRNS (2014) “regardless of our personal values, we base most of our self-esteem on the fulfillment of the dominant values of our culture.” Noels (2014) asserted that language fluency as a cultural practice could predict higher cultural/ethnic connectivity. Taking an even closer look at language, Sanchez, Chavez, Good, & Wilton (2012) examined the relationship between Spanish fluency and in-group acceptance or rejection. This study found that when “non-Spanish speaking Latinos were put in a situation wherein they must disclose their inability to speak Spanish to another Latino, they were less likely to categorize themselves as Latinos, reported lower collective self-esteem, and reported less connectedness to other Latinos” (Sanchez, Chavez, Good, & Wilton, 2012). This current research study takes a closer look at language as well as other cultural customs such as food and cultural attire and attempts to draw connections to the potential impact these customs and practices have on one’s sense of self as it pertains to race and ethnicity.

## **2.3. Power, Privilege and Impact on Self Perception**

In the United States, minority communities are subjected to varying forms and levels of oppression. African Americans have been targeted through multiple avenues of oppression such as housing, employment, the criminal justice system, and access to resources (Lofton & Davis, 2015). The ideology

that preceded these varying forms of oppression were that African Americans are “inhumane,” “criminal,” and “dangerous” (Alexander, 2012).

From this ideology formed a system defined by Alexander (2012) as a racial caste system. This is a system by which people of color, specifically African Americans, were kept in a position of inferiority. Similarly, Latinx lives were historically devalued beginning with the genocide of their Native American ancestors. Although the origins of these oppressive beliefs dates back centuries, the presence of these beliefs continues to exist and influence how life is experienced by these two groups. Since Afro-Latinx people have a connection to both groups, the research focused on how oppression is experienced by Afro-Latinx people and explored similarities and differences with the experiences of African Americans and mestizo Latinx people.

For every identity marker such as age, gender, and race, there is a social expectation for one to demonstrate a certain standard of competence. Men are often expected to be tough, strong, and absent of emotion, while women are expected to be gentle, nurturing, and emotional. In order to successfully social adapt, one must meet their assigned social expectations. These expectations may change when in different social groups such as family, friends, and racial groups. This research takes a close look at the different social expectations placed on Afro-Latinx individuals and assesses what tools they use to best navigate these different systems. One method of social adaptation is code switching, a process by which an individual's expressive tendencies such as behavior, language, vernacular, and tone attune to the social context they are in. John et al., (2015) examined two different „codes“ used by African Americans; African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and Standard American English (SAE). AAVE was described by the researchers as English that is often times spoken in lower income neighborhoods and SAE was described as English used in professional settings such as the workplace. These researchers assert that African Americans' primary use of Standard American English is to avoid prejudice and discrimination from others. The current research study explores mental wellness as it relates to self-perception (i.e., self-esteem, self-confidence and racial esteem) of Afro-Latinx people and examines how they navigate different racial or social spaces in the United States.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1. Participants**

Convenience sampling was used to recruit (n = 22) Afro-Latinx individuals (ALI), 18 years of age or older, that are living in the United States. Twenty-seven percent of participants were between 18-24 years of age; 50% were within 25-34 years of age; and 23% were within 35-44 years of age. Demographic characteristics about the sample were captured in the first phase of data collection. Of the 22 participants, 16 identified their gender as female; 5 identified as male; and 1 identified as gender fluid. 11 participants of the 22 participants identified as first-generation American citizens. 11 of the participants identified their socioeconomic status as middle class and the other 11 identified as low class. 11 of the participants identified as monolingual English speakers and the other 11 participants identified as multilingual. Participants identified as Belizean, Puerto Rican, Latino, Black, Mixed Race, or Latinx.). This study was reviewed and approved by IRB at the California State University, Northridge (CSUN). Recruitment avenues included common areas located on the CSUN campus, social media



platforms, email, and word-of-mouth. The researcher utilized both physical and digital flyers as a tool for recruitment.

### **3.2. Measures**

Anonymous surveys were conducted with (N = 22) participants. The voluntary participants were informed that the anonymous survey contained 21 questions and would take approximately 15-20 minutes to complete. The participants had the option of completing the anonymous survey on the spot, online via Qualtrics or scheduling a preferred place, day, and time for accommodation purposes. An Information Sheet was provided prior to data collection in this phase.

All 22 participants were informed that in addition to the surveys, in-depth interviews would be taking place later. At the end of the survey, each participant was asked if they would like to volunteer for the interview phase of the study. The researcher recruited 7 participants and collected their names and phone numbers on a separate sheet from the survey questions and answers in order to maintain participants' anonymity. At the beginning of each interview, participants were provided with the Adult Consent Form. To move forward with the interview, each participant was required to review and sign the Adult Consent Form.

### **3.3. Research Design & Data Analysis**

This research study utilized a two-pronged qualitative research design. The data collection methods consist of surveying and interviewing.

In the first phase of data collection, participants completed the survey that collected demographic data (i.e., age, race, gender, etc.) as well as data that specifically assessed the research questions. The second phase of data collection consisted of semi-structured interviews to go further in-depth exploring self-perception and mental health wellness. The questions asked in this portion of the study were developed based on prominent themes captured in the first phase of data analysis. All interviews were conducted by the same interviewer who also identified as Afro-Latino on the research team. The research team utilized open coding via thematic analysis for both phase one and two. The themes identified in phase one were used to conduct in-depth interviews to gain a deeper understanding of the salient emergent themes from phase one. Saturation and triangulation of the data was accomplished utilizing both audio recordings and written notes. In addition, all participants who were interviewed reviewed the transcripts to confirm information and insight captured.

## **4. Results**

The research found that physical characteristics, cultural connectivity, and systemic and interpersonal oppression are all significant variables that impact self-perception and mental health wellness among Afro-Latinx individuals. Additionally, several prominent themes emerged from both phases of data collection. These themes consisted of: *Feelings of rejection from the African American community, feelings of rejection from the Latinx (Mestizo) community, feelings of closeness to the Latinx community, positive experiences with race within families, physical characteristics influencing social location, and feelings of having to choose one racial/ethnic identity.*

### **4.1. Emergent Themes:**

#### **4.2. Rejection from the African American Community**

Feelings of rejection and unacceptance from the African American community was one of the most prominent themes that stood out in the research. These feelings were the result of several different factors such as presenting in a way that is not congruent with what is expected from the “competent” African American person, the ability to speak Spanish, and self-identifying as mixed race and/or being of a lighter skin complexion. When asked to describe experiences with feeling either accepted or rejected by African Americans, Stephen stated:

*I often feel as though I am rejected by African Americans because there is a notion that I am “trying not to be black” by embracing all of my racial/cultural identities.*

This sentiment was a strong one felt among the majority of the participants. Some participants felt as though they were perceived this way based on a notion that they were trying to distance themselves from membership to the Black or African American community. One participant admitted to having experiences rejecting her African heritage. Elizabeth stated the following:

*In my developmental years I hated my blackness and did anything I could do to assimilate. I relaxed my hair, refused to go outside so I wouldn’t tan.*

#### **4.3. Rejection from the Latinx (Mestizo) Community**

Participants expressed feelings of being rejected from the Latinx (Mestizo) community based on the following characteristics: physical appearance, limited or no Spanish speaking capability, not having knowledge of or engaging in cultural practices. Joey stated the following:

*I constantly feel uncomfortable when I am around the Latino community at times. I have had members of the Latino community say rude and inappropriate comments about those in the African American community and tell me I’m not like “them” simply because I speak Spanish.*

Although this participant is accepted by the community, messages of rejection are still communicated indirectly and through microaggressions which creates discomfort and inner conflict for the participant. Manuel also mentioned:

*I feel rejected by Latino communities because they don’t believe me when I tell them I’m Spanish since I don’t always look like it and I don’t speak Spanish. Also, since my family didn’t always celebrate the culture growing up.*

Manuel’s statement reinforces the strong association of physical appearance and cultural connectivity to feelings of belonging, acceptance/rejection, and connection.

#### **4.4. Closeness to the Latinx (Mestizo) Community**

Another theme that was visible throughout the research was the feelings of closeness to and acceptance from the Latinx (Mestizo) community based on their ability to speak Spanish. Although many of the participants who identified with this theme also shared experiences of feeling like an outsider among Latinx (Mestizo) groups based on other characteristics, language fluency was one area in which many felt the most connected to their Latinx culture as well as the Latinx community. Teresa shared the following:

*Due to my ability to speak Spanish, I feel that I am granted more access to the Latino community. I am able to build trust with individuals who would otherwise not trust me, I am able to relate to Latino people more, and overall, I feel more connected to my roots.*

#### **4.5 Positive Experiences with Race within Families**

65% of participants shared that they have had mostly positive experiences with race within their families. Some participants mentioned that Afro-Latinx culture is diverse in nature which inevitably makes them more racially open. Silvia stated the following:

*My experiences within my family have been mostly positive. I have a pretty diverse family with different cultures and backgrounds.* Tania added:

*I have had mostly positive experiences with race in my family, I am lucky to have a very mixed family.*

Based on what was shared by the participants, multiracial and multicultural families fostered racially positive

experiences in terms of openness and positive regard for other races.

#### **4.6 Physical Characteristics Influence Social Location**

In terms of systemic and interpersonal oppression, 82% of the participants indicated that they believe that they have been discriminated against and oppressed based on their race. Physical characteristics were perceived among the participants as major determinants of privilege and disadvantages. More specifically, a popular theme among the participants was a feeling that Afro-Latinx individuals who appear to be of mixed race, lighter skin complexions, or who have straighter hair patterns are afforded more privilege than their counterparts who appear mostly black with a darker skin complexion and a kinkier hair texture. Although considered to be the more privileged individuals within the Afro-Latinx community among many of the participants, some participants who identified as mixed race reported being impacted by feelings of rejection from black and Latinx (mestizo) communities.

Only 14% of the participants self-identified their race as “black” while 45% reported being perceived by others primarily as black. This means that although the majority of the study participants identify as multiracial, a large fraction of them is perceived only as black. As a result, this determines the social expectation that is placed on them and has the potential to make many feel as though they were outsiders among the communities to which they belong.

Code switching was identified as a tool to best manage social spaces and the perception that others have of

them. Emily stated the following:

*Sometimes I feel pressured to change my demeanor around certain races. [For example] I don’t sound like I’m „trying to talk like I’m white” (proper) around African Americans. I don’t want to sound ignorant or “ghetto” around Caucasian people and as a result feel inferior to them.*

Amanda added:

*When I am with my black friends, I find myself listening to more hip-hop and rap so they don’t judge me and with my Mexican friends I can listen to whatever but they sometimes expect me to listen to rap.*

#### **4.7 Pressure to Choose One Racial or Ethnic Identity**

Some participants alluded to a struggle that they have encountered throughout their lives, a dilemma of not being perceived as “black enough” or “Latinx enough”. The need to feel accepted by each cultural/racial/ethnic group from which one belongs has been an overarching theme in the research.



64% percent of the participants expressed that they have felt pressured to choose one racial/ethnic identity. Martha stated that:

*My experiences have left me feeling confused while growing up and still sometimes as an adult. I don't belong to one single group and it gets frustrating when it's time to put everyone in a specific category. As a young adult, I'm still navigating who I am, and embracing being a black woman since that's people's first impression and what I am sometimes profiled as.* Chris added:

*Not feeling accepted by both communities [African American and Mestizo] that I belong to has been challenging.*

## **5. Discussion**

The purpose of this article was to explore the racial experiences of Afro-Latinx individuals and explore variables that impact self-perception and mental health. The results are significant because they depict a variety of experiences that exist for individuals within the Afro-Latinx community that was been nonexistent in the existing literature. These experiences with racial identity were shown to have both positive and negative effects on self-perception and emotional mental well-being. Physical characteristics, cultural connectivity, systemic and interpersonal oppression and racialization were all shown to have significant impacts on one's self-perception and mental health as it relates to "fitting in", via code switching. These findings are significant in that it adds additional culturally relevant information for human service providers engaging, assessing, and serving Afro-Latinx individuals in the United States.

Based on the themes that emerged from the study it is highly recommended that human service providers apply a Critical Race Theoretical (CRT) framework to understand the unique experiences within the Afro-Latinx community as it relates to self-perception and mental health. Furthermore, this critical lens names how the power and privilege related to "whiteness" needs to be de-centered to center communities of color lived experiences within systems in the United States (Delgado and Stefancic, 2012). This becomes important when assessing contributing factors of the mental health and wellness of Afro-Latinx individuals. When examining the effects of physical characteristics on self-perception and mental health among Afro-Latinx people, many of the participants referred to physical attributes that more closely embodied whiteness such as light skin and straighter hair patterns as desirable traits and traits that grant more privilege and access. Consequently, individuals who did physically embody these traits reported experiences of feeling rejected by African Americans and feelings of acceptance from Latinx (Mestizo = a person of mixed race, especially one having Spanish and indigenous descent) people. Additionally, those who reported speaking with a vernacular that most resembled what is considered "standard" for white people, reported feelings of rejection from the African American community.

Proficiency in Spanish speaking was also highly valued in the research as it served as a tool to establish membership and relationships with the Latinx community. Those who did not speak Spanish or who were limited in their ability to speak Spanish, reported feelings of rejection or being an outsider. Additionally, those who did not engage in many Latinx cultural practices identified more closely with African American culture. Code switching as a tool to better navigate social spaces was found to be used

by most of the participants. Code switching can be used as a means of demonstrating racial/cultural competence and acquiring acceptance and access to different racial and cultural groups.

Human service professionals working in the mental health field can utilize this data to develop culturally relevant and congruent treatment plans and services when assessing for factors that may be contributing to mood (i.e. low self-esteem). The goal of this research was to increase visibility of a group that is not well represented in empirical research as it relates to the aforementioned factors. Based on the racial phenotypic characteristics that each AfroLatinx person contains, they are often faced with being labelled by society as either African American or Latinx. Although many Afro-Latinx people may identify with these groups, this research showed that many felt that it does a disservice to them to not have their full racial/ethnic/cultural identities acknowledged in different social spaces including but not limited to human service.

One of the limitations that was present in this research was having a small sample size. As a result, the findings have the potential to lack generalizability to the larger Afro-Latinx population within the United States. Additionally, the majority of the participants were residents of Southern California and because of this, the data represents a specific type of experience that might look completely different in various regions across the United States (i.e., New York, Florida, and Texas).

## **6. Conclusion**

This article sought to explore the experiences of Afro-Latinx adults as it relates mental health wellness and self-perception. Specifically, focusing on physical characteristics, cultural connectivity, systemic and interpersonal oppression, and racialization in the United States. Additionally, the article sought to highlight the lived and living experiences of this population that often goes unrecognized in the United States. The research was successful in identifying significant and often nuanced dynamics that exist within, across and around this population. Future research should be aimed at exploring these themes more closely and increasing the visibility of this population. Human service professionals should be mindful of the data that was found in this research study and integrate the concepts into their practice when working with and advocating for this population.

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