LIFTING THE VEIL: CONSIDERING THE SOCIAL WORKER’S APPROACH TO
RACISM-BASED TRAUMA IN WORK WITH THE INCARCERATED PERSON

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ABSTRACT

There is a veil that divides those willing to discuss the construct of race and those participating in racial ambivalence or color blindness. It is because of that veil or divide that discussing race, racism, and the traumatic effects of racism is a task that many are still learning how to do successfully. This study is among the first to question how social workers engage with the construct of racism-based trauma. Furthermore, this study beckons a consideration to racism based stressed experienced by the incarcerated person. By not considering racialized stress and harm, one not only has limitations in the intervention process but runs the risk of perpetuating more harm. The goals for the study were as follows: To identify how justice system social workers define racism-based trauma; to understand whether or not justice system social workers consider the carceral experience to be racially traumatic; to inform practice approaches to racism-based trauma among justice system social workers.

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with twelve social workers to learn how they conceptualized racism-based trauma in their work with the incarcerated person. Inductive and abductive coding from the transcribed interviews revealed that racism-based stress was considered to be an experience often unbeknownst, long-lasting, and accentuated by locale. Reflections on the incarceration experience also suggest that the experience is racially stressful and that it occurs before, during, and after incarceration. Findings highlight the importance of increasing knowledge in the construct of racism-based trauma to be beneficial in practice while confronting whiteness and allyship were identified challenges.
The findings for this study suggest that an engagement with one’s racial identity before and during a critique of racialized systems is beneficial in social work practice. Some examples of engagement include conceptualizing race and racism-based trauma experienced by the client, considering how to assess and relieve stress from racism, and how to maintain wellness while doing so. In these engagements, a shift from being culturally competent to being racially competent is possible and encouraged for the social worker. The aims of engaging with construct ultimately strengthens and diversifies social work pedagogy, training, and policies.
DEDICATION

This manuscript is dedicated to the people of color who are often marginalized and disregarded while in the throes of an American justice system. This is also dedicated to the social workers and advocates committed to combating racism encountered by clients, colleagues, and oneself. Lastly, this manuscript is dedicated to the memory of Bradley O. Triplett.
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Lastly, I would like the social workers whom contributed to this study to know that I appreciate their time and willingness to tell their stories. Discussing one of the most polarizing constructs in this country is not easy. Your honesty and candor have been inspiring and ignited a new fire in my belly. I hope that the stories will spark meaningful
conversations and thoughtful approaches to working with incarcerated person, combatting racism, and in the field of Social Work.
CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

This chapter begins by detailing the racism-based stress experienced by an African-American man involved within the justice system. A reaction in which a multitude of symptoms, signs, and injuries follow one or more experiences of a racially oppressive situation, whether done overtly or covertly, indicate how robust race-based trauma occurs (Carter, 2007a; Carter, 2007b). This also serves as a definition for racism based traumatic stress and injury. In further establishing the problem of his experience, the chapter also engages with gaps in literature, how racism-based trauma is engaged by the social work practitioner, and how racism-based trauma is situated within the context of incarceration. The chapter ends by proposing the dissertation, listing the anticipated results, and how information from the dissertation will be disseminated.

Statement of the Problem

When working with clients, social workers are charged by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) and the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) to consider the following: the burgeoning justice system, the justice system’s traumatic effects on the incarcerated person and how one can better serve the incarcerated client (CSWE, 2015; NASW, 2015). The following contextual narrative provides an authentic view into the life of just one person wedged within the throes of the American justice and carceral system. In the upcoming narrative, the name “Mr. Reed” is fictitious and is used to protect confidentiality. Nevertheless, his experience is real. Mr. Reed’s experience also merits some thought beyond the often used narrative that the “system is broken.”
Mr. Reed will be presented as a person feeling a high level of stress from experienced racism. The racism that Mr. Reed experienced was heavily facilitated and supported by the justice system. After reading the narrative, one may declare that Mr. Reed was suffering from racial trauma or racism-based trauma. Recognition of certain factors has given rise to this construct and the desire to thoughtfully assess the stressors experienced after an encounter with racism. How one recognizes and assesses for stressors prompted by racism is left entirely up to the assessor. In this case, Mr. Reed’s legal team and social worker were presented with Mr. Reed exhibiting racism-based stress that neither he nor the team knew was legitimate.

A Contextual Narrative: Mr. Reed’s Story

Melvin Reed, a 45-year-old African-American male, is scheduled to be released from a United States Prison (USP) in five months. The USP is a highly secure United States penitentiary. Recently, Mr. Reed was relocated by the United States Marshals Service to his hometown in a southeastern city. In 2004, a federal jury convicted Mr. Reed of being guilty of various drug offenses and firearm charges. Mr. Reed had his original sentence of 360 months (30 years) to serve in a federal corrections institution, vacated after becoming a beneficiary of a sentencing law prompted by the case known as Johnson vs. the United States of America. At resentencing, the court imposed a 215-month sentence (18 years), drastically altering when Mr. Reed would be released from prison.

Mr. Reed has disclosed that the events leading up to his resentencing prompted a great deal of worry, stress and anxiety for him. Mr. Reed has stated that he often had to advocate for himself and has no trust in the justice system. During the appeal of his
sentence and events leading up to his resentencing, Mr. Reed advanced two arguments: That his sentence was substantively unreasonable and that his supervised release condition—which requires him to register as a sex offender under the Sex Offender Registration and Notification Act (“SORNA”)—violated the United States Constitution. In Mr. Reed’s offense history lies a sexual misconduct charge that he acquired when he was a young adult. Currently, the law under which Mr. Reed was found to have violated is no longer a law. Mr. Reed has often struggled with the stress of being labeled a sex offender and often blames any sexual deviance that he may have exhibited on the lack of his father’s presence. Mr. Reed, being a member of a prideful African-American family from a historical, predominately, African-American city, is also embarrassed and constantly references the justice system’s disregard for the “good, black man.” Mr. Reed is grateful for his upcoming release but lost his fight to avoid registering as a sex offender. He is worried about how he will be perceived and how he can manage registering when there are so many other things for him to be concerned with.

A subsequent hearing following his resentencing was halted when Mr. Reed became irritable with his attorney and the presiding judge. Mr. Reed refused to answer several questions regarding his plans for release, sweated profusely, trembled, and stated that the court and attorney had “no idea about his worry and what all he needed to do for his release!” Because of Mr. Reed’s refusal to answer questions and his irritability, the judge halted the hearing. The hearing was to occur in 10 weeks to allow a social worker on Mr. Reed’s legal team to meet with Mr. Reed, conduct a psychosocial evaluation, and to advocate for Mr. Reed. Mr. Reed is now detained in a county jail. A brief exchange with the social worker prior to exiting the courtroom involved Mr. Reed disclosing the
following: “I want to get out, but I worry about being released and do not trust the system. That white lady (his attorney) don’t give a fuck about me. They locked me up and now they want to release me early. This is their fuck up and I have not had any time to prepare to be on the outside!”

**Gaps in the Literature**

Despite the significance and frequency of both racial-trauma or racism-based stress reactions there is comparative little published research or discourse in social work across all sectors of practice, education, and policy. The review of the literature here is an effort to critically examine how these social work sectors have engaged with race and racism and where critical gaps remain that might be filled by this investigation.

One of the most difficult aspects of recognizing and assessing racism-based trauma is the inability for the client to initially and accurately articulate the source of the stress. When this happens, it is up to the practitioner to consider whether or not being victimized by racism has an impact on the intervention relationship. While taking a trauma informed approach in one’s social work practice has been emphasized with by scholars, how one effectively takes the approach in regard to racism-based trauma is still to be explored (Knight, 2015; Levenson, 2017). Engaging with and assessing one’s stressful experience of a racist event can be a daunting task for the social worker and the client (Pender-Greene & Blitz, 2012)For racism-based trauma specifically, the ability to assess and treat the trauma is highly difficult when the dyad of practitioner and participants is unable to acknowledge experiences and identity statuses (Carter, 2007b).

Furthermore, gaps exist in how social workers provide education and engage with a construct such as racism-based trauma. Practitioners and scholars within the field of
Social Work have indicated that there is significant interest in the racial equity and racial nurturance in the social work education setting. The rationale for this is at least two-fold in that the racial dynamics of budding social workers should be nurtured. Social workers should also maintain sensitivity to the client’s race in practice settings to ensure best practices (Patni, 2006). Exploring the teaching and learning experiences of social work students of color has been a focal point for scholars and serves as indicia that one of the first settings in which social workers uphold social justice is within the classroom (Davis, 2004; Gair, 2018; Hamilton & Schneider, 2018; Satterly, 2017). This is assumingly one of the first settings during which budding practitioners may experience stressful situations prompted by racial salience or insensitivity. This is a highly important and developmental lesson as this is one of the first true engagements with race and its place within the field of Social Work.

A consideration into the development of social workers by scholars has also noted that many benevolent racial attitudes, racial microaggressions, and points of privilege are discovered and given thoughtful consideration (Davis & Gentlewarrior, 2015; Huber & Solorzano, 2018). This is a very meaningful process that is encouraged by large bodies such as the Council of Social Work Education and bodes well with social workers being able to assess and treat the stress and racism experienced by the incarcerated client (Trolander, 1997).

Richards et. al (2000), reported that the slightest engagements with one’s own personal trauma experiences in prison prompted physical discomfort while Ford and Hawke (2012) report that trauma affect regulation is effective, but difficult. In addition to assessing for trauma, there appears to be a difficulty in how trauma is disclosed and
reported in the incarceration setting. For instance, scholars engaging with race from a practice standpoint have stated that the experiences of racism and viewing of racism such as police shootings of unarmed African-American, have prompted African-Americans and other People of Color to form aversive perceptions of the helping professional (Gaston, Earl, Niscanci, & Glomb, 2016; Moore, et al., 2017; Tolliver, Hadden, Snowden, & Brown-Manning, 2016). The fear of the helping professionals like the social worker is compounded by racial dialogue that is often not nurturing, equitable, and reflexive (Flaherty, Ely, Meyer-Adams, Baer, & Sutphen, 2013).

While gaps in the literature regarding a topic are not uncommon, the lack of consideration to racism-based trauma amongst Social Workers gives way to new explorations. This is emphasized greatly for social workers engaging with clients whom are entrenched within the carceral experience and setting. Some interventions utilized by social workers have been implemented across a number of prisons while seldomly prompting input from those incarcerated (Fitzgerald, Chronister, Forrest, & Brown, 2012; Hatcher, 2010; Martin, 2011;).

Recent work of Kang and Burton (2014) suggests that a trauma informed approach be taken by the social worker in a carceral or forensic setting to advance the argument that young, justice involved, African American youth have been traumatized by their racial discrimination. When trauma prompted by racism is considered, the following is still disregarded: that other manifestations other than Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) may be experienced, interventions are mainly targeted toward justice involved youth and not adults, interventions available for adults lack racial, sexual, and cultural sensitivity, and traumatic events during incarceration are not seen as impactful.
experiences (Abramovitz & Mingus, 2016; Fitzgerald, Chronister, Forrest, & Brown, 2013; Rogers & Law, 2010; Skuse & Matthew, 2015; Stepteau-Watson, Watson, & Lawrence, 2014; Watson, Washington, & Stepteau-Watson, 2015;).

There appears to be a critical need simply to move beyond identifying the need for a trauma informed approach and consider the dynamic traumatic experiences of clients (Strand et al., 2014). If not done with consideration and sensitivity, social work curricula, practice models, and research may inadvertently be detrimental. A more thoughtful and diverse consideration of trauma informed practices is intended not only to help the client, but the practitioner as well. Racism based trauma has been mentioned and the engagement with the concept may be new for the client and the practitioner. While a psychological construct, it is important to understand how the social work practitioner defines and understands the construct. This understanding aids in developing a more considerate practice approach and further develops the definition of the construct.

Establishing a clear and developed definition of a construct such as a racism-based trauma aids in the construct’s legitimacy. More specifically, engaging with the possibility of a racism-based carceral setting in which social workers work is necessary to fill gaps and to refute the following: unnecessary punishments and the notion that if the incarcerated person is traumatized, that it is an additional and deserved form of punishment. It is still unclear as to whether or not the incarcerated person or justice system social worker consider the experience to be a racially traumatic one (Breckenridge & James, 2010; Karatzias, et al., 2018; & Knight, 2015).
Proposed Investigation

This study proposed to evaluate the role and experiences of social workers serving as advocates within a justice system or carceral setting while maintaining a focal point on racism experienced by the incarcerated person. The project aimed to answer the following research questions: How do justice system social workers define racism-based trauma? Do justice system social workers consider the incarceration experience to be one where racism-based stress occurs? To what extent do justice system social workers in a justice system setting engage with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad? What are the benefits and challenges to engaging with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad?

The findings from the study sought to do the following: (1) To identify how justice system social workers define racism-based trauma; (2) to understand whether or not justice system social workers consider the carceral experience to be racially traumatic, and; (3) to inform practice approaches to racism-based trauma among justice system social workers.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

The chapter begins with a detailed overview of the American construct of race and racism-based trauma posited by Dr. Robert Carter. The chapter then explores incarceration in America by positing that the experience prompts stress in three phases and that the phases prompt racism-based stress amongst the incarcerated person. During the discussion of incarceration within America, a discussion of various policies and practices that support the system will also occur. A discussion of Critical Race Theory and Janet Helms’ Racial Development Theory will also be included in order to ground the arguments contained herein. The chapter ends by proposing an investigation under the premise that racism-based trauma in the carceral setting is one needing exploration.

Discussing and Contextualizing Race

Engaging with Race

Defining race.

Before engaging with ways to combat the stressors of racism, some preemptive engagement with race in America is needed to contextualize the experiences, their history, and offerings as to how race in America may have evolved. The construct of race has historically prompted debates on which particular race is superior, ponderings as to why one’s race justifies being punished more often than another and struggles among oneself as an adherence to a construct designed by others prompt stressful contemplations of one’s identity (Du Bois, 1903; Kovel, 1984; Smedley, 1993). On the superficial level, race may also be considered an identifier and categorization technique for one’s appearance and physical traits (Carter, 1995; Guthrie, 1976; Johnson, 1990). It is with these thoughts in mind that the idea of race as dynamic and developed for the benefit of
some and for the unintended detriment of others, is more palatable (Pinderhughes, 1989).

For the purposes of the dissertation, race will be identified and defined as follows: a social construct used to presumably classify all persons on the basis of physical appearance for the purpose of resource allocation, policy development, identification and dominance (Carter, 1995; Yee, Fairchild, Weizmann, & Wyatt, 1993). Admittedly, the definition of race may vary and has been engaged by many whom adhere to different values, cultures, and disciplines (Bernasconi, 2010; Fogel, 1977; Frazier, 1957; Holguin, 2011; Katzmann, 1968; McKay & Avery, 2006; Powell & Moraes, 2018; Tead, 1952). This definition is not exhaustive and is used to nurture concepts such as stratification, policy development, and the removal of autonomy that will be discussed when engaging with stressors prompted by one’s race.

**Race in America.**

Hierarchies established on the premise of race and treatment of one’s fellow person under the auspices of race have had a great impact on the lived experience in the United States of America (Carter, 2007a). It is because of that impact that many of those assisting in maintaining wellness, social workers included, have pondered ways to combat the stressors prompted by race (Helms, Nicolas, & Green, 2012).

Race in America is a unique social construct that has the capability of providing a healthy, collective experience for some and a dividing experience for others in almost every aspect of life (Elliott & Pais, 2006; Eyerman, 2011; Hobsawm & Ranger, 1983; Smith, 1987).

This duality in experiences exists mainly between those who are visibly racial White Americans having been descended from European ethnic groups and those who are
visibly racial persons of color. The latter group most certainly alludes to the “melting
pot” or “salad bowl” concepts of the building, composition, and fluidity in the shaping of
America (Greenberg, 1995; Hirschman, 1983; Stoll, 2018; Thernstrom, 2004; Tibbetts &
Keeton, 1992). The decision to refer to the group as people of color as opposed to “racial
minorities” is an attempt to eliminate the consideration that the experiences and
contributions to America by the group were small, irrelevant, or inconsequential. This
may be a tedious point to make but as will be posited in a later section, combatting
racism-based trauma and carrying out best practices should involve a keen awareness of
oppressive practices that are overt and covert.

When discussing people of color in this writing, it is in reference to the following
visibly racial groups: American Indian or Alaskan Native, Asian American, Black or
African American, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino. The
experiences in America between these two racial classifications have been well
documented and have historically indicated that visibly racial White Americans have
historically experienced life in America in a much less domineering and stressful way
than people of color (Carter, 1995; Katz, 1985; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). It is also
relevant to establish the dichotomy because contrary to some beliefs, White American
culture, actions, and practices have historically shaped the intervention setting and
influenced the overwhelming majority of counseling approaches, therapeutic approaches
and intervention strategies employed by social workers (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Brown,
1950; Casas & Vasquez, 1989; Kitano, 1989; Majors & Nikelly, 1983; Trimble, 1976).

These brief and preemptive engagements with the concept of race are not intended
to overthrow a construct that has been woven into the fabric of America. On the contrary,
the aforementioned points regarding race are intended to critically, but fairly, engage with the consequences of race, both good and bad. These experiences, given the amount of time, make it extremely difficult to quantify the extent of the treatment, the damage that has been done, and leave much to be considered (Carter, 2007b; Carter & Muchow, 2017).

The reasons for the interactions between or the treatment of people based on race are many. One of which is racism. With the ability for racism to be perpetuated in covert and overt manners, it is an oedipal endeavor to eliminate it and alleviate the stress and injury sustained as a result. During this entire engagement with the dynamics of race and race-based traumatic stress injury, it is important to establish and maintain a tone of progressiveness, as opposed to ridicule. The critiques, reflections, and thoughts offered are done not to eliminate racism but to engage with ways in which social work practitioners may interact with clients whom may not even be aware that they are experiencing stressors prompted by racism (Jackson & Samuels, 2011; Lee & Bhuyan, 2013; Robinson, 1989).

**Maintaining whiteness.**

By engaging with race in America, it is not difficult to declare that the upholding of traditions serves as a major highway through which communal practices such as traditions, can better travel and have an impact on race (Anderson, 2006; Hobsawm & Ranger, 1983; Sheehan & Vadjunec, 2012). Traditions evoke pride, a sense of community and oftentimes a dangerous amount of conviction or entitlement. The soft subtleties and the boisterous disruptions that have been utilized in the erasure and creation of traditions, to make way for new ones, have reinforced the dominating
construct of whiteness in America (Behm-Cross, 2017; Buck, 2012). The construct that is whiteness in America, is supported by romanticism, reminiscence of the “good ole’ days” and a desire to maintain superiority, dominance, and control (DeFlippis, Fisher, & Shragge, 2006; Dottolo & Kaschak, 2015; O’Connell, 2016; Winberry, 1983). This romanticism could easily be described as simply having pride in one’s race and culture. It is also worth offering up the notion that the desire to maintain and perpetuate whiteness can be done by members of all racial groups and has as much to do with upholding a cultural belief as it does with championing a physical appearance. Nevertheless, none of these notions should serve as an interruption from the fact that historical whiteness in America has influenced negative outcomes in a number of settings in which the person of color may be involved in. To extend the notion that whiteness is significant to the dichotomous experience of racial groups, the following sections of the paper will offer suggestions as to how whiteness has impacted racial experiences: the white male lens and American social policies.

**The white male lens.**

One of the introductory ways in which to think about the white male lens is to engage with the thoughts of conviction or possible false sense of entitlements that accompany this particular lens. This particular lens is also one that is insensitive to gender dynamics while pandering to paternalistic and hegemonic practices. The following “truths,” as put forth by Eric Goldman (1952) in his works on American policy making, contribute to the lens: “Absolute Truths” of the “White Man’s Burden,” “Manifest Destiny,” “Laissez Faire Economics,” “Calvinism” and “Social Darwinism.” These truths, which have footprints throughout American policies, will be discussed
specifically in the next section and contextualized by mentioning specific policies (Goldman, 1952; Goldman, 1959).

Through some engagement with American policies, it is postulated that a number of people have experienced some form of stress or oppression. Furthermore, one can see that the oppression may have been falsely justified by the policies and laws enacted by policy makers. For instance, not long after experiencing independence, policy makers developed and implemented the Indian Removal Act of 1830 and forced the relocation of Native Americans, First Nation People or Native People (Carlson & Roberts, 2006; Kowalski, 2015; Mokuau & Matsuoka, 1995). Although the justification for the removal was partly based around what land was sovereign and what wasn’t, the majority of the policy promoters, white men, believed that the people living on the land couldn’t appreciate, develop or utilize the land the way that early settlers could (Cave, 2003; Meyers, 2000; Mokuau & Matsuoka, 1995). Under the tenants of the “White Man’s Burden” and at the most surface level of analysis, policies such as those justifying slavery in America were permissible because it was believed that the African descended person was bestial, unable to be autonomous, and needed to be thought on behalf of (Burin, 2012; Morris, 1982). By continuing to apply the rationale of these truths to the white male lens, it is posited that the “White Man’s Burden” contributed to slavery’s vitality and endorsement of the heinous treatment of the African descendant.

American policy development, through the white male lens, seems to be strongly influenced by the notion of “Calvinism” or the Protestant work ethic belief (Goldman, 1952). In simplest terms, it is assumed that those who do not work, do not and should not be able to be self-sustaining. This tenant also stresses that hard work is an allusion to
being closer to God and that one is evil or not closer to God when they are lazy or unable to work. American policies related to workforce development, career development, vocational development, and training, have good intentions of helping one be self-sustaining. The policies also carry an undertone that one must work to not only make oneself productive but to make oneself respectable in the eyes of peers and God (Cristaudo, 2017; German, 1995). The notion of Calvinism appears to be favorable to those that believe in the religion and ideology of God; however, those that believe in a different religion or faith that is different are left out and often disapproved of by religious and policy leaders (Judd, 2013). It seems as though this “truth” is designed to benefit those that have similar values and beliefs to the social actors whom implemented the policy.

In addition to the “White Man’s Burden” and “Calvinism” is Goldman’s belief that policies are influenced by the notion of “Laissez Faire Economics” or a “hands off approach” to the markets and economy of America (Goldman, 1959). It seems as though the issue with this “truth” is that the policies regarding economics only seem to affect those that can be hurt the most by them. It could also be declared that these policies are developed by the 1% and affect the other 99% of the country (Stark, 2010). Having a “hands off approach” to the economy and the policies that govern it completely eliminate the presence of checks and balances (Stark, 2010). It also alludes to how dissociative this truth and this lens can be. One could declare that it is difficult for a policy maker to regulate and delegate policies regarding how much a good should be worth or who should receive it when such goods have always been accessible to them.
Two commonly used “truths” by Goldman that are visible in this lens are “Manifest Destiny” and “Social Darwinism (Goldman, 1959).” For both of these truths, there is a belief that a certain person or group of people is stronger, smarter and better than another and that they are that way simply because they are destined to be that way (Livingstone, 1992). A point of critique in regard to those subscribing to Social Darwinism and manifest destiny is the consideration of their subscription to believing in their dominance comes after having taken oppressive, culturally insensitive or non-holistic measures. These insensitivities can be seen in the recent “stop and frisk” policies, immigration reform or criminal justice policies that advise harsh sentences without considering mental health issues of an offender. As will be mentioned in the next section, a number of early policies were enacted because a different language was spoken, a different creed was adhered to and because of varying skin tone. After all of those differences are considered, there should be no wonder as to why a group has “manifested” or transcended beyond another.

Engaging with social policies.

As suggested earlier, racial experiences in America may have been dictated by the white male lens and the policies developed through utilizing the same lens. This section will engage with some policies to illustrate how people of color were affected by the policies and how the policies had an impact in the assigning, nurturing, and situating of power for white people. The purpose of this section is also used to begin to reinforce the thought that stressors because of one’s race may arise as a result of policies. Whether they be related to slavery, immigration, housing, incarceration, or policing, certain
policies seem to have played a significant part in the generational hardships for people of color.

As will be discussed in a later section regarding critical race theory, the viewpoint that policies in America are influenced by the American white male lens is about more than whether or not the lens deliberately affects racial experiences. It will be posited now and later that policy development, done intentionally and unintentionally, is about relying on the aforementioned “truths” while instilling laws and practices in place that establish and maintain power for certain groups. Admittedly, this is a very macabre consideration given to the developmental process of policies. This is also suggesting that one particular racial group is not susceptible to the detriments of a policy. Some groups are more susceptible and more affected than others. Returning to an analogous consideration to be completely objective, policies and their impact could be compared to a hurricane. Those in the direct path of the hurricane upon initial landfall, its front right side, and the eye, are highly susceptible to its effects. Groups of people further inland may experience a much weaker aspect of the hurricane and may have had time and resources to evacuate and seek shelter. Being impacted by the hurricane can be expected by all groups; however, the impact of those living further inland and given a head start to evacuate will almost certainly be impacted less than those who first felt the effects of the storm. Furthermore, the group living inland, although affected by the storm, is assumed to stand a much greater chance of recovering and becoming self-sufficient than the group at the bottom.

The maladaptive experiences of race such as a generational lack of resources, access to resources, and the effects on health, make recovering from the hurricane or in
this case, policies, very difficult. For instance, the diasporic policies dictating land and
ownership have been tumultuous for First Nation People, Hispanics, and Asian
Americans, leaving many to deal with the effects of having their property taken,
undervalued, or assigned in areas that are unsustainable or unwanted (Gill &
Bhattacharya, 2017; Lurie, 1976; Taylor, 2013). Policies engaging with the right to own
and the value associated with that land and property have also neither been sensitive and
endearing to the African-American, African descended, or black person (Baldwin, 2007;
Burch, 2014; Dyer, Bailey, & Tran, 2009; Ferleger, 1993; Schultz, 1998). The disparities
in racial experiences driven by policies can extend well beyond the issues of land
ownership. The emphasis on property and land ownership comes under the premise that
influence and control in America come if and when one has assets and capital (Burch,
2014). If those two are missing, a gap in racial experiences will exist.

The experiences of home and land ownership among people of color can be better
done under the assumption that people of color have a level of freedom and time to
participate in the ownership process. The person of color, when not enthralled in issues
dealing with “heir property” or unfair valuation practices, is assumed to be preoccupied
with the tasks of maintaining, holding, and justifying their freedom and right to have a
place in American society. Xenophobic banter among the American person has been
rampant regarding immigration laws and the aggressive policing of those appearing to
belong to Hispanic ethnic groups (Johnson, 2016). This banter has also made it to the
minds of policy makers and manifested into policies that in turn have been contested as
being unconstitutional (Balderrama, 2005; Brown, 2012; Valenciana, 2006).

Nevertheless, the fact that a push for the unfair policing of certain groups to even make it
into legislative consideration is sobering and exemplifies the power of certain rhetoric around race. From Black Codes, to Jim Crow Laws, to the Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, a questioning as to whether or not the execution of justice is just a way to covertly engage in contemporary slavery and servitude has occurred (Hartnett, 2007; Wood, 2007). Often referred to as the Prison Industrial Complex, a suggestion has been made that a prison economy is present in United States of America allowing corporations to tap into an abundant supply of cheap labor and profits (Thompson, 2012). The Prison Industrial Complex is an entity in and of itself composed of copious amounts of prisons, supported by decades of acts said to encourage rehabilitation while achieving justice for various victims (Smith & Hattery, 2007; Thompson, 2012). The dynamics or topics of the Prison Industrial Complex extend well beyond the American dollar or the cells of the prison. Mass imprisonment is a phenomenon prompting the deterioration of families, the loss of assets, and an inability to adjust to a setting that is often not supportive during the reintegration process (Rosen, 2002). The Prison Industrial Complex has also become impactful to the penal system well before a person steps into a prison and well after the person leaves the prison (Thompson, 2012).

Much like the tale of Sisyphus, the racial experience of people of color is one of arduously repeating tasks that are seemingly easy. These considerations of racial experiences and their influences on many aspects of American life is not exhaustive. These considerations are brief engagements with the dynamics of an American society that promises freedom with one hand and how freedom should be exercised with the other. If that freedom is exercised in a manner that is not conducive or comfortable to those in power, it will be stopped, frisked, and adjusted (Torres, 2015). The dichotomous
experience among two racial sects mentioned earlier has been considered and has
encouraged thoughtful consideration as to how one is affected when the stopping,
frisking, and adjusting has become unbearable. In the next section, the unbearable nature
of one’s person being subjugated on the basis of race will be engaged with by reviewing
the history and development of Racism-Based Traumatic Stress.

**History and Development of Race-Based Trauma**

The Race Based Traumatic Stress model is sensitive to all people of color who
have experienced a racism-related incident. There are other constructs available that are
more sensitive to specific racial groups. to explore in regard to the traumatic stress
injuries prompted by harmful racist incidents. For instance, the construct known as Post
Traumatic Slave Syndrome, serves as a guide to engaging with the African American
experience. Race-Based Traumatic Stress, as a construct, is holistic and considerate of
people of color while also serving as a guide for both helping practitioners and
participants.

Dr. Robert Carter, Former Professor of Counseling Psychology at Columbia
Teacher’s College, is the major contributor to the construct of race-based traumatic stress
and stress reactions. He has emphasized the need for this conceptualization after
recognizing that people of color experience high levels of racism related stress (Carter,
2007a). This also led to the sobering realization that a number of social science
practitioners did not know how to recognize or engage with this specific type of stressor
and the events that caused it (Carter, 1995; Carter, 2007a; Carter, 2007b).

When considering the assessment of race-based stress, this approach is important.
Knowing when to assess for this particular stressor, how to assess it, and appropriate
ways to relieve that stress can be assumed to be a challenging process for both the practitioner and the client. As often alluded to by Carter (2007), this engagement with race is a delicate interaction during which a positive therapeutic experience is beholden to the highly individualized feelings of a person, how well the person can articulate feelings regarding his or her racial experience, and how nurturing the practitioner responds to the disclosure.

The Race-Based Traumatic Stress model presents as a tool that is sensitive to all persons of color while simultaneously guiding the practitioner so as to not reiterate more trauma. A definition of racism, the classes of racism, as well as the nuances involved in considering the experiences as injurious as opposed to traumatic will be engaged in the following sections. The criteria for experiencing Race-Based Traumatic Stress and settings where encounters with racism may occur will also be included.

**Race-Based Traumatic Stress**

A reaction in which a multitude of symptoms, signs, and injuries follow one or more experiences of a racially oppressive situation, whether done overtly or covertly, indicate how robust race-based trauma occurs (Carter, 2007a; Carter, 2007b). This also serves as a definition for Race-Based Traumatic Stress and Injury. Recognition of certain factors has given rise to this construct and the desire to thoughtfully assess the stressors experienced after an encounter with racism. Some of those factors are that race-based stressors have a deleterious effect on one’s well-being and the inability for both the client and the practitioner to truly engage with race hinders a healthy therapeutic interaction or
practice setting (Carter, 2007a; Carter & Forsyth, 2001; Carter, Forsyth, Mazzula, & Williams, 2005; Thompson, Brazile, & Akbar, 2004).

A racism-based traumatic stress injury initially involves feeling an amount of emotional or physical discomfort as a result of experiencing one of the following classes of racism: racial discrimination, racial harassment, and discriminatory harassment (Carter, 2007a). Upon experiencing one of the forms of racism, one is then expected to perceive the event to be negative, sudden, memorable, and uncontrollable (Carter, 2007a). These experiences may not be all that one may perceive after the racist event; nevertheless, they do aid in recognizing the following critical signs of one having sustained a racially traumatic injury: intrusion, avoidance, or arousal may then be present (Carter, 2007a). Engaging with and assessing one’s experience of a racist event and the injury sustained from the event can be a daunting task without some sort of physical indicator.

According to Carter (2007a), the inquisition into whether some thoughts are recurring and thus intrusive, aid in that assessment. If a person of color is insistent that the details of the event be disregarded but is still negatively affected from the event, the person is assumed to be exhibiting a sign of avoidance (Carter, 2007a). If a person of color is reporting or exhibiting some irritability about the event, the construct suggests that the person is exhibiting a sign of arousal. To indicate just how nurturing the construct lends itself to the dynamics of the individualized experience, a person may also exhibit positive critical signs such as resilience, vigilance, activism, and a renewed sense of strength (Carter, 2007a; Carter, 2007b).
Because these reactions can arise as a result of a number of different experiences, the construct also suggests that the negative reactions accompanied by a cluster of such as anxiety, rage, depression, withdrawal, shame, and guilt, also need to be present (Carter, 2007a). The critical reaction signs accompanied with symptom clusters is needed to more strongly consider the entire reaction an injurious one and not a mental health disorder (Carter, 2007a). This distinction is important as it shifts away from pathologizing the experience and suggesting that the feeling has arisen from internal thoughts as opposed to external forces such as racism. The construct is multiphasic and layered. Because this is so, it is helpful to include Figure 1 which details the order of the race or racism-based traumatic stress, according to Carter. To illustrate Carter’s position on the order of traumatic stress, a brief return to Mr. Reed is appropriate. Mr. Reed experienced various forms of racism during his incarceration and reintegration experience. From those experiences, Mr. Reed deemed a lot of his experiences and his reaction as one that was frustrating and out of his control. Two of the more critical signs of Mr. Reed’s injury was an avoidance of white people and arousal in the form of sweating and anxiousness in the courtroom. The final phase in the figure involves assessing for a cluster of signs. For Mr. Reed, those included depression, hypervigilance, and low self-esteem.
Defining racism: Intent vs. Impact.

Applying Carter’s conceptualization to a definition of racism, it is meaningful to first consider that the act is very dynamic. Similar to the aforementioned “white male lens,” racism is not always blatant and can often be carried out by covert means. The dynamic aspects of racism and the struggle with defining racism is also influenced by those accused of perpetuating racism. The occurrence of refuting the perpetuation of racism with a simple notion that one’s actions were not intended to be harmful or arose under the auspices of race is a tree that many racist actors may seek shade under (Carter, 2007b). This behavior of refusing to be tied down by a definition has also left those feeling harmed by racism to tend to their own injuries, thus making the assessment of race-based stress very difficult (Carter, 1995; Carter & Helms, 2002). Defining racism and engaging with its dynamics holds perpetrators of racist acts accountable, while also aiding in the articulation of the harm experienced by victims of racism. One cannot begin
to express the feelings experienced after a racism-based encounter if the racist behavior has not been clearly identified.

With race-based stress informing the definition, racism is defined as follows: a subjugating and holistically harmful use of power involving the intentional allocation of social rewards, the assigning of economic resources and the granting of access and opportunity, by members of one racial group believed to be superior over another racial group (Carter, et al., 2013).

**Classes of racism.**

Given this definition of racism, it is also important to consider the notion that racism is an everyday occurrence for people of color (Bryant-Davis, 2007; Bryant-Davis & Ocamo, 2005). In essence, there are levels to it or different types of racist events. A helpful approach to understanding the dynamic of racism has been to group them into different types. This also assists in the identification of an event, aids in targeting the intervention approach, makes a more succinct connection to mental health effects, and eliminates ambiguity that certain naysayers to the construct may rely upon.

**Racial discrimination.**

Racial discrimination is defined as a type of avoidant racism utilized by members of the assumed dominant racial group to maintain complete or minimal distance from the nondominant racial group through the use of certain behaviors, thoughts, mandates, and strategies (Carter et al., 2005). With respect, this definition appears to vary slightly from others by eliminating the notion that this type of avoidant racism occurs accidentally. Because the purpose of the assessment and the construct is to prompt reflexivity and accountability among all involved in the racism-based trauma construct, it seems as
though it is important to eliminate the possibility of relying on an accident as an excuse to not be recognized. This type has the propensity for being the most covert. For instance, racial discrimination involves the exclusion from important social and work networks, the refusal to acknowledge personal achievements, and harsh limitations to yielding opportunities for achievement like college admission or work promotions (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Feagin & McKinney, 2003; Gildersleeve, Croom, & Vasquez, 2011; Grant & Simmons, 2008). This type of racism places a high level of duress and confusion on the recipient of the action and produces race-related stress in the form of anxiety, depression, anger, confusion, and self-doubt.

**Racial harassment.**

Involving a type of racism that has the potential to be more overt and blatant, racial harassment is defined as the hostile use of feelings, thoughts, and actions by the assumed dominant racial group to concretize the belief that those in an assumed non-dominant racial group should remain in their inferior position (Carter & Helms, 2002). Although not directly mentioned by Carter, it seems plausible that more than one type of racism is utilized in racism-based behavior. What is particularly harmful about racial harassment is the deliberate actions utilized to subjugate. It is as if the perpetrator of racial harassment wants to be overt to make clear the notion that members of a certain group should stay in, understand, and accept their assigned inferior status. This type of racism includes physical, interpersonal, and verbal assaults; the reinforcing of racial stereotypes, and assuming one’s dangerousness or threat without any factual basis (Carter & Helms, 2002; Feagin & Sikes, 1994). Although the negative emotional reactions from this are almost the same; barring any physical pain or physical injury, positive reactions
have also been seen that include confrontation with the racist perpetrator and using the negative feelings as a source of personal strength and inspiration to refute racial harassment (Carter, 2007; Carter & Helms, 2002).

**Discriminatory harassment.**

The notion of discriminatory harassment is also introduced to categorize the more complex and repetitive experiences of racism. Defined as aversive hostile racism involving strong elementally hostile thoughts, feelings, and actions intended to completely exclude or distance a person of color from an environment, this racism is assumed to occur at individual, institutional, and cultural levels (Carter, 2007a). To illustrate this act, one may consider an African-American female scholar embarking on her first year as a junior faculty member. Although she has gained access to the job, her experience of discriminatory harassment will come in the form of poor training, guidance, unfair critique, reprimand, and demotion based solely on her race. She has experienced avoidance from those who neglected to guide her and hostility from those who then critique her harshly and unfairly.

**Assessing, Measuring, and Treating Race-Based Trauma**

Thus far, Race in America, racism-based stress and the theoretical rationale for racism-based stress have been discussed. The considerations are important and have been intended to allude to the complexity in thinking about one’s own thoughts on race while engaging deeply with the thoughts of others. The following sections will engage with how experiences with racism among people of color have been assessed and how the use of those assessments may aid in the treatment process. The writing still posits that Carter’s model is nurturing to all people of color, but it is important to include
assessments more specific to one racial group. There are slight differences among all racial groups and reviewing them all suggests that considering people of color while nurturing specific groups is appropriate. While not exhaustive, a brief engagement with assessments will be done to suggest that the assessment for racism-based stress can be done in a thoughtful and specific manner.

**Assessments.**

Assessing racism-based trauma is heavily postulated on how the understanding of specific identity developments can help both participating in an intervention or advocacy dyad. This approach supports the notion that racial identity is an individualized experience that plays a part in one’s belief about stress being prompted by his race and racism. Because the experiences of racism-based stress can be highly individualized, it will be important for the practitioner to not rely solely on one assessment. One assessment may be negligent to certain specific experiences and may also prompt the interventionist to lean on the assessment and not prompt reflexivity. The assessments utilized to understand the effects and perception of discrimination are plentiful. Although they will not all be engaged in this writing, it is pertinent to list some of these assessments. By doing so, one can begin to understand the tools that are available. Although they will not be engaged within this proposal or research, it is vital to learn how practitioners assess for the trauma and what they feel may be important in the assessment process while considering various races. The assessments will not be discussed in this research project, but they are as follows: Everyday Discrimination Scale, General Ethnic Discrimination Scale, Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale, The Implicit Association Test, Cross Racial Identity Scale, The Color-Blind Racial Attitudes Scale and, The Multiple Discrimination Scale.
Treatment Approaches.

The belief that the treatment to racism-based trauma or stress begins during the assessment phase is a personal one but is often alluded to by Helms and Carter in their conceptualizations. For Helms, the People of Color Interaction model posits that the quality of the interactions from the beginning until the culmination is influenced by the racial identity status of those in the therapeutic interaction (Thompson & Carter, 1997). During that interaction, Helms suggests that the following three relationships occur: Regressive, Parallel, and Progressive (Helms, 1995). In a regressive relationship the client is done more harm, while a parallel relationship equates to no new growth, sensitivity, or understanding on behalf of the client or the professional (Helms, 1995). It is only in the progressive relationship that one is able to thoughtfully consider the racial dynamics of the client and be sensitive (Helms, 1995). In striving for and establishing a progressive relationship, a setting in which one can talk about race and comfortably develop his or her racial identity, is needed. Because experiences of racism evoke such strong emotions that can make discussing the effects difficult for the client and the practitioner, establishing a progressive relationship is one of the first steps in treatment. This is an appropriate one and aids in the understanding that nothing can be about the person actually experiencing the racial encounter (Carter, 2007b).

Carter’s suggestion that in attempting to make clients feel better that additional harm could be caused is a fair and sobering one. Nevertheless, suggestions from Carter (2007b) on how to treat racism-based stress have been offered to serve as a guideline. They are as follows: Learn about the client’s life circumstances, obtain racial-cultural history of the participant, explore whether or not one’s race or cultural background has
been a source of pride, pain, or both and employ interventions that are contextualized. Two treatment approaches that could be added could be the education of racism with the client and developing coping strategies that could be utilized after experiencing a racist event. A model of this guideline and possible steps to be taken is included below in Figure 2. Ultimately, the treatment of racism-based trauma is one that involves a high level of reflexivity on behalf of both participants. It also involves a semi-structured process of educating, building resiliency, and awareness on behalf of the client so as to respond to future racism-based stress in a manner that is not debilitating.

**Figure 2. A Treatment Approach to Racism-Based Trauma.**

**Acknowledging vs. Assigning.**

The engagement with the different types of racism is a process that is needed and one that should be continued. These distinctions are also important if one aims to truly acknowledge the many racial dynamic experiences brought forth by the client. For instance, the previous example of the African-American scholar was sensitive to her race.
but did not factor in whether or not her sex served as a basis for the aversiveness and hostility. One of the most useful aspects of the race-based stress and trauma construct is that it prompts an initial consideration of a construct like race that dominates discriminatory practices in America, while also leaving room for other considerations.

Contrarians to the construct may wonder exactly why such a construct should be separated from an overarching construct such as Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder. In short, the reactions from experiencing racist events are debilitating at the mental, physical, and physiological level and reflect injury. Furthermore, the stress experienced occurs across the entire life span for people of color, across a number of different settings and as a result of direct actions of others. For instance, although they are not directly mentioned in the preemptive engagements with race-based stress, the K-12 setting has the potential to serve as a constant source of racism-based stress for black adolescents in America (Jernigan & Daniel, 2011).

The effects of experiencing racism among people of color also has the potential to affect members across the latter part of the life span; theretofore, prompting effects on developmental milestones and perspectives on the life course (Baldwin, Jackson, Okoh, & Cannon, 2011). The writing would be negligent to people of color and those whom have experienced the detrimental effects of racism if the mental and physical effects were not at least mentioned. In short, the psychological and physical health of African-Americans is affected by simply viewing acts of racism and extends into how one copes with the simplest of stressors, how one’s sexuality is shaped, how diseases such as hypertension become more prevalent and how pain is felt (Aymer, 2016; Banks, Kohn-Wood, & Spencer, 2006; Blackmon & Thomas, 2015; Burgess, et al., 2009; Earnshaw, et
al., 2016; Pieterse & Carter, 2007). In spite of all of the maladaptive effects, people of color have managed to generate the “keys for survival” and perseverance (Moore, et al., 2017; West, Donovan, & Roemer, 2010). The construct deserves its own consideration and the experiences of racism-based stress are plentiful. Later, I will posit that the incarceration setting is at least one setting where racism-based stress is experienced by the incarcerated person.

**Theoretical Underpinnings**

While race and the construct of racism-based trauma have been defined and articulated here, it is important to acknowledge that engaging with the two constructs can be an arduous task. There are two theories that nurture a critique of the incarceration setting, aid in helping the social worker engage with race, and drive the rationale for this study. One theory is known as Janet Helms’ Racial Development Theory, involves a significant amount of interpersonal and intrapersonal reflection, and posits that the experience of the stress is an individualized experience prompted by the overt and covert actions of others. The theory, although borrowed from the Thomas and Cross Models of Psychological Negrescence, presents a multiphasic approach that considers the fluidity involved in a person of color’s engagement with identity. Cross (1971) and Helms both allude to the fact that to live in the United States is to engage with race whether one wants to or not (Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991).

The impacts of racism on one’s wellness and psychosocial development last throughout the entire lifespan. Considering how one views oneself in relation to race certainly aids in understanding the experiences of the client. This engagement is also important as the developmental milestones of people of color can be trying and has often
been left out of major psychosocial development theories utilized by social workers (Csizmadia, Brunsma, & Cooney, 2012; Swanson, et al., 2003). How one views oneself also aids in the upholding of whiteness or other detrimental approaches to race among the client and the practitioner.

**Critical Race Theory**

The second underpinning for the construct and this study is Critical Race Theory. In a manuscript published by Dr. Carter (2007b), he stated that he wanted to offer a way in which mental health and legal professionals might help persons whom have experienced racism. This emphasis on aiding legal professionals, along with the aforementioned notion that racism is perpetuated through policies, nurtures racism-based stress well in Critical Race Theory. Nevertheless, the purpose of including Critical Race Theory echoes the encouragement of social workers to engage with laws and their effect on racial dynamics (Teasley, Schiele, Adams, & Okilwa, 2018). By doing so encourages greater informed practices and communicates that considering some form of restorative justice for the client can be a healthy focal point (Gavriellides, 2014).

**Racial Development Theory**

Janet E. Helms’ Racial Development Theory nurtures the Race-Based Traumatic Stress construct and the notion that the experience of the stress is an individualized experience prompted by the overt and covert actions of others. The theory, although borrowed from the Thomas and Cross Models of Psychological Negrescence, presents a multiphasic approach that considers the fluidity involved in a person of color’s engagement with his or her race and identity. Cross (1971) and Helms both allude to the
fact that to live in the United States of America is to engage with race whether one wants to or not (Cross, 1971; Cross, Parham, & Helms, 1991). The following explanation of Helms’ theory will serve as an exemplar into how racial identity development is a continuous effort but one that ultimately ends in a healthy and sensitive identification of the self. The theory also lends itself to delineating the processes that one may go through when critiquing race and the constructs upheld by race.

**People of Color Identity Development Theory**

Composed of four conceptualizations, Helms’ Racial Identity Development Theory identifies developmental statuses or stages of people who compose the dominant racial groups in America. The four conceptualizations are as follows: The Black Identity Development Theory, the People of Color Identity Development Theory, the White Identity Development Theory, and the People of Color-White Interaction Model. For clarity, this section with Helms’ theory will only detail the People of color Identity Development Theory as the Black Identity Development Theory and this theory only have nominal differences. The stages of the two theories are comparable and as Helms (1995) suggests, the holistic experiences of the Black, African-American, or African descended person in America are assumed to be highly similar to People of Color (Helms, 1995). The People of Color Interaction Model, which will be discussed in a later section, also has more relevance in the section regarding how to assess and interact with a client experiencing racism-based stress (Helms, 1990; Thompson & Carter, 1997).

The People of Color conceptualization includes the following statuses: conformity, dissonance, immersion-emersion, internalization, and integrative awareness.
For clarity, Figure 3 depicts the statuses and indicates the assumed order of development. An explanation of the statuses is also included in this section.

![Diagram of People of Color Identity Development Stages]

Figure 3. The People of Color Identity Development Stages.

In experiencing conformity, a person of color is conflicted with being passive and active in the belief that the white person is the archetypal person, that success is solely achieved by adhering to white standards, and that people of color are at fault for their believed ineptitude and struggle (Helms, 1995; Thompson & Carter, 1997). One is considered to be active in this engagement when those feelings are displayed overtly and passive in the engagement when the feelings are ignored and internalized (Helms, 1990).

The transition from one status to another status seems to occur after a realization has occurred. For instance, one reaches the status of dissonance after realizing that a majority of white people and people who utilize a white lens will always see people of color as inferior regardless of how much one conforms to their standards (Helms, 1990). Undoubtedly so, this is jarring, sad, and resonating experience for a person. Helms does not specifically mention when this status occurs, but it is worth considering the notion that it, like some of other statuses, can be experienced throughout the life span. To drive Helms’, point further, this feeling was reflected abrasively and appropriately by artist Kanye West when he declared that “even if you in a Benz, you still a nigga, in a coupe (Hill & West, 2004).”
Upon entering and exiting the dissonant status, a person reaches the immersion-emersion status. During this time, a person thoughtfully engages with one’s race in a holistic manner and how best to adhere to those expectations at an individual level that is comfortable (Helms, 1995; Thompson & Carter, 1997). Even in this status of “awakening,” Helms (1995) suggests that there is still stress that arises from alienating oneself from white peers while becoming angry at other people of color for remaining in the initial stage of conformity. This stress is not alleviated until emersion occurs during which the person of color becomes engaged with race, gains an understanding of the differences, and develops a personal perspective not beholden to the thoughts of others (Thompson & Carter, 1997).

The culminating phase or status of internalization involves a complete rejection and intolerance of racism while being fully involved in one’s racial identity (Thompson & Carter, 1997). This status involves a great deal of commitment to one’s beliefs and the maintenance of a stronghold on race that is unable to be altered by some of the other inferior statuses (Thompson & Carter, 1997). Internalization is presented as a status capable of being completely concretized. The status takes on a harmonious approach to racial identity and race relations by communicating that one does not have to tear down or berate one racial group to uplift another racial group.

**White Identity Development Theory**

Because living in America ensures that race will be engaged, no one is immune to the engagement. Helms suggests that white people encounter identity statuses just as people of color. Those statuses are as follows: contact, disintegration, reintegration, pseudo-independence, immersion-emersion, and autonomy. The statuses are also
depicted in Figure 4 to aid in clarity and understanding. While each stage is listed, they are depicted in a circle to indicate the fluidity or cyclical nature of developing one’s identity.

Helms suggests that the initial status of contact is one that involves a basic acknowledgement that a phenotypical race other than that of white exists. This status prompts a person to become enamored or experience a level of wonderment that a “brown” or “yellow” person exists. Helms (1995) and Thompson & Carter (1997) do not directly mention when this status is experienced, but their explanations lead one to expect that it is first experienced in adolescence. This status does not even prompt thoughtful engagement with other races and involves feelings of simply wanting to touch the hair of the person of color or engage with them on a very superficial level. Only until one reaches a status of disintegration does one begin to acknowledge the dynamics of race and one’s whiteness. This status, while brief, prompts beliefs that even the slightest engagement into matters regarding the person of color will alter the status quo (Helms, 1990).
The status of reintegration occurs after realizing that the engagements with race are too much, thus prompting a retreat into the sole engagement with one’s whiteness (Thompson & Carter, 1997). This status will more than likely only consider the person of color if the person of color is adhering to whiteness. A person in the reintegration status coupled with a person of color in the conformity status would have interactions with little to no conflict or debate. This status is also one during which active expression of the status quo through the use of racism may become apparent. Although Helms does not mention it, this status serves as a safe zone for whiteness and alludes to how developing a healthy sense of racial identity involves maintaining comfort.

Helms (1990) suggests that a positive white identity begins to form after experiencing a particularly jarring event during which the questioning of one’s privilege and status occurs. This pseudo-independent status does not completely eliminate racist ideologies but does prompt one to explore ways to eliminate them (Helms, 1995; Thompson & Carter, 1997). Helms does not mention it directly; however, it may be fair to suggest that the jarring event may not have been an event involving race.

The statuses of immersion, emersion, and autonomy all nurture the shifting away from whiteness and the desire to change people of color. One becomes immersed in ways to make positive change and emerges from the experience comfortable and aware of their race while committed to aiding in the wellness of the person of color. Much like the final status of the People of Color identity theory, whiteness is acknowledged and used as a means to help and not hinder.

Helms’ suggestion that these statuses are capable of being experienced simultaneously is a plausible one. It also seems fair to suggest that one is capable of
reverting from the more mature statuses to immature ones. There are also other experiences or variables interacting with race that may have some impact on the developing racial identity. Although it may be miniscule in the overall discussion, the racial identity development of those who identify or who are identified as visibly biracial is another aspect to consider. This approach supports the notion that racial identity is an individualized experience that ultimately plays a part in one’s belief about stress being prompted by one’s race and racism.

The lenses offered by Helm’s theory prompt the social work practitioner to check on themselves while also checking on someone else. The lens also prepares the practitioner to be comfortable in a process of engaging with race that may be overwhelming. While alluded to earlier, the construct of race in America was one designed not to be questioned but adhered to. Being critical of such a construct and aiding those negatively affected by requires one to know oneself. Once those identity statuses are engaged with, one can then utilize Critical Race Theory and the lens that it provides.

**Critical Race Theory**

In a subsequent manuscript that clarified the purpose and conceptualization of the Race-Based Traumatic Stress Injury Model, Carter stated that he wanted to offer a way in which mental health and legal professionals might help persons whom have experienced racism (Carter, 2007b). This emphasis on aiding legal professionals along with the aforementioned notion that racism is perpetuated through policies nurtures racism-based stress well in Critical Race Theory. It should also be noted that the writing is not suggesting that social workers engage with legalese. It can be a cumbersome process.
Nevertheless, the purpose of including Critical Race Theory echoes the encouragement of social workers to engage with laws and their effect on racial dynamics (Teasley, Schiele, Adams, & Okilwa, 2018). By doing so encourages greater informed practices and communicates that considering some form of restorative justice for the client can be a healthy focal point (Gavriellides, 2014).

One of the basic notions in jurisprudence involves the notion of “ignorantia legis neminem excusat” or “ignorance of the law excuses no one.” Under this notion, one is held to the standards of a law even if one is unfamiliar with the tenants of the law. Moving beyond simply understanding a law, many proponents of Critical Race Theory suggest that the disparaging treatment of people of color has too little do with the understanding of law and everything to do with the definition of crime and what is considered criminal (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Critical Race Theory lends itself to the examination by promoting the following crucial themes: critiquing liberalism, employing revisionist history, interest convergence and structural determinism. All of the themes suggest the covert and overt subjugation of certain groups of people through such mechanisms as the justice system, education, the military and framing (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Instances during which one is sentenced unfairly will be used to contextualize the themes of the theory.

**Revisionist history.**

What began as the culmination of narratives and anecdotes from legal scholars, Critical Race Theory has provided scholars with a lens to advocate for marginalized groups and expose biases among the American justice system. The theme of revisionist history has particular relevance. As it relates to analyzing the laws that have shaped legal
practices, scholars suggest reviewing history through an objective and open lens that may more accurately reflect the experiences of the minority (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). This can be an intense process that involves reviewing copious amounts of material and convincingly arguing that the subject in the material has been used to promote the interest of elite whites (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). As has been discussed in scholarship regarding courtroom sentencing behavior, the reviewing of justice policies employed to allow discretionary sentencings allows one to understand how unfair, discretionary sentencings have evolved throughout American history (Abrams, Bertrand, & Mullainathan, 2012; Doerner, 2015; Johnson & King, 2017).

**Interest convergence.**

The theme of “interest convergence” used in Critical Race Theory alludes to the need for the presumed dominant racial group to employ fruitful and economic practices that maintain self-interests at the expense of human rights and human capital (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007). Critical Race theorists posit that a number of civil rights laws came to fruition after World War II and during the Cold War to better serve relations between the United States of America and other countries (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The theory suggests that the laws had little to do with equality and everything to do with appeasement and the shift of appearance from lynching phenomena and racism to covertly maintain power, practice capitalism and inadvertently construct hierarchical race relations (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; West, 1995). This theme also aligns with thoughts regarding the blossoming of the Prison Industrial Complex and its nurturing of the new wave of indentured servitude in regions across the United States (Rawal, 2015). As it relates to sentencing discourse and the practices employed, the
concept of interest convergence suggests that the discretionary sentencing practices have prompted disparities that fuel asset deprivation, family separation, and generational inequities among the African American people and people of color (Martin, 2011; Rosen, 2002).

**Critiquing liberalism.**

The third theme of critiquing liberalism has the potential to be unnerving as the suggestion is made that the neutrality used in a number of policies that govern the American person is not so neutral (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). On the contrary, suggestions that the notion of liberalism supports a utopic and naïve notion of “color blindness” seem to hold some weight when discussing the disparities among those sentenced for crimes in America. The disparities have been examined, are present and will continue to be examined to aid in the contestation of notions that laws and practices are free from racial biases or favoritism (Abrams, Bertrand, & Mullainathan, 2012; Crenshaw, Roberts, & Austin, 1995; Doerner, 2015; Fischman & Schanzenbach, 2012; Petersen, 2017; Singh & Sprott, 2017).

**Structural determinism.**

The fourth theme, structural determinism, suggests that the pace towards racial progress occurs between a fast and slow pace so as to not prompt impatience but to still maintain power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The difficulties involved in gaining power or coming into power and freedom is not new and have prompted some internal reflection among African Americans and other ethnicities (Cooper, 1892; Du Bois, 1903). Nevertheless, this fourth theme does allow for the marriage of the following two perspectives that drive the theory: analyzing racial differences through physical settings
or constructs and analyzing the discourse that constructs race (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). Structural determinism is suggesting that the control of power has shifted from overt to covert modes of practice. Because of this, it is appropriate to analyze symbols or mediums that have previously been ignored or considered to be obscure. The diction employed, or the texts used to describe behavior that is considered to be illegal often prompts unfair treatment, subjective framing and a reinforcement of class dynamics and racial insensitivities (Catalano & Gatti, 2017; Delgado & Stefancic, 2001).

Throughout the writing thus far, the “race” in Race-Based Traumatic Stress model has been replaced with terms such as “racism,” “racist incident,” or “racism-based stress.” With respect to the major contribution put forth by Carter, this is an attempt to begin to build upon the model and shift from the likelihood of one suggesting that the stress is an internal manifestation. The construct and the feelings of those assumed to have experienced the stress, is too important for it to be disregarded. As alluded to in the earlier sections of the writing, the racial subjugation that has occurred in America is historical and begs the consideration as to whether or not all people of color have experienced some form of racism-based stress? Many who argue against the construct may say that this is impossible. Because a major prompt for the construct arose as a way to assess victims of discrimination for legal decisions, the writer often wonders whether or not the power of the construct is open to being diluted if every person of color declares that they have experienced some racism-based stress. In lieu of all of the aforementioned considerations, it is up to the practitioner to acknowledge the stress and not assign what has or has not been stressful. To do the latter would undoubtedly perpetuate an oppressive lens or domineering behavior that social engagement practitioners should
avoid. It is also up to the practitioner and scholar to consider settings and contexts in which racism-based trauma occurs. The following section of the review of the literature nurtures the idea that the American justice system, in setting and in context, has served as a perpetrator of racism-based trauma.

**Summary**

The Critical Race Theory is being used to generate some inductive themes for the study. This study is utilizing the lens because interactions with racism-based trauma rely on critiquing systems propped up by unfair laws and subjugation. The Racial Identity Development theory is also being used as a lens because it allows one to be fluid in their thoughts on race. This dissertation is about developing one’s thoughts on race to better serve the client experiencing racism. The lens also limits the amount that the participant can be unfairly critiqued for not being familiar with a construct that he or she lives in daily. There are two theories that nurture a critique of the incarceration setting, aid in helping the social worker, are dependent on one another, and drive the rationale for this study. While the notion of pervasive and unjust policing is not new, this does begin to concretize the notion that being arrested in traumatic. This also extends the tenants of Critical Race Theory and the notion that laws, and systems are in place to allow actions that are overtly and racially oppressive

**Race, Trauma, and Incarceration**

The primary context for this study is that of the social worker engaging with the incarcerated person of color. The incarceration experience in a number of prisons across the country has been described as “worse than slavery”(Mancini, 1998). This description echoes an assumed myth that people of African, Asian, and Native descent are more
prone to participate in behavior deemed to be criminal. The experience is racially oppressive, traumatic, and often involves a higher amount of law enforcement contact, disparate sentencings on the basis of race, and an unjust reintegration process. For clarity, trauma is defined as follows: an emotional response to an event prompting shock, denial, unpredictable emotions, flashbacks, strained relationships, nausea, and other physical symptoms (Dalenberg, Straus, & Carlson, 2017). The experience is also composed of at least three symbiotic phases that include: the sentencing phase, the span of the prison sentence and the reintegration phase. This section will explore the prison system, the incarceration experience, and the racism-based trauma that occurs within the phases. This section will also continue to engage with the theoretical approach of Critical Race Theory to accentuate the notion that the American justice system is heavily dependent on the marginalization of people of color.

**Pondering on the Burgeoning Prison System**

The cost, rate, and magnitude of incarcerating citizens in the United States of America is staggering (Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2010). Of the thousands of people released from prison annually, at least 60% of those of whom are released from incarceration find themselves incarcerated again one year or more after release (Cerda, Stenstrom, & Curtis, 2015; Munyo & Rossi, 2014). The number of those incarcerated and those who recidivate is so high that many states have made attempts to downsize prisons by implementing and exploring cost effective programs that help avoid detention altogether (Miller & Khey, 2017; Sundt, Cullen, Thielo, & Johnson, 2015; Vito, Tewksbury, & Higgins, 2010). While those attempts are progressive, they still fail to
lower the billion-dollar price tag that the carceral system carries (Johnson, Eck, & Cullen, 2015; Wexler, Lurigio, Rodriguez, & Blumstein, 2011; Wexler, et. al, 2011;). Proponents of the American carceral system and its practices suggest that the high number of those incarcerated simply rises as a result of the need to ensure justice, public safety, and the rehabilitation of unfavorable character and actions (Bodenhorn, 2016; Sundt, Salisbury, & Harmon, 2016; Taylor & Auerhahn, 2015). Opponents of the carceral system suggest that the rulings that place one in prison and into the thralls of reintegration suggest that the rulings are often based on irrelevant, limited pieces of legal information and also on characteristics such as race, gender and age (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2006; Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). The drastic increase in the number of prisons, the ease of being incarcerated, the issue of the rehabilitative or punitive practices argument, and the cost of prisons will be discussed to serve as indicia of a burgeoning system. While those reasons are all important, it is also important to examine this burgeoning system and acknowledging the following: There is a need for the majority to exercise economical practices that maintain self-interests at the expense of human rights and human capital (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007).

Prisons: “Built to Last”

Human warehouses.

For clarity, carceral settings in this writing refer to detention centers, correctional institutions, prisons, halfway houses, civil commitment centers, holding cells, and miscellaneous spaces used to detain a person under the jurisdiction of a judicial court at the local, state, and federal level. Within the United States, carceral settings outnumber colleges (Ingraham, 2015). More specifically, there are more than 100 federal prisons,
1,719 state prisons, 80 jails on American Indian territory, 1,850 facilities for justice-involved youth, and more than 3,000 local jails in the country (Wagner & Sawyer, 2018). During the presentation of the First Step Act designed to take the first steps in prison reform, Jared Kushner (2018), a Senior Adviser of President Donald Trump, asked the following: “Is the purpose (of a prison) to punish, is the purpose to warehouse, or is the purpose to rehabilitate?” Based on the aforementioned statistics and the projection that prison populations within the United States will increase, it is not difficult to presume that prisons may very well serve as a warehouse (Wan, Moffat, Xie, Corben, & Weatherburn, 2013). Although the intent of the policy is a positive one, the irony of the First Step Act being pushed in 2018 suggests that those currently involved in the justice system should wait while the system is reformed and reevaluated. Furthermore, if the true purpose of prisons was to administer rehabilitation and punishment in an efficient and just manner, the number of carceral settings would not outnumber colleges.

**Errors made while building prisons.**

In this “fast track prison construction” era, mistakes are made, and it is important to mention them (Wyllie, 1993). For instance, protecting the public has been used as a justification for the building of more prisons. While protecting the public is imperative, there remains a lack of consideration to community members, their opinions of prison construction within their communities, and no education on the implications of building a prison in or near established neighborhoods (Sechrest, 1992; Myers & Martin, 2004). This desire to rapidly build prisons also alienates community members and fails to address important issues such as public confidence, the sharing of power, and public risk (Abrams, 1988; Martin, 2000).
In addition to the oversight of not considering the insightful voices of community members, there is also a very practical issue of not being able to efficiently maintain, operate, and control the facilities in accordance with certain accreditation standards (Clayton, 1996). Simply put, a surplus of prisons requires a surplus of manpower to operate, maintain, and conduct administration within the setting. While not a relatively new thought, it is the lack of consideration to these requirements and the overwhelming tasks required to operate and maintain a prison that a number of facilities experience the following: federal intervention due to the following: overcrowding, inmate litigiousness, violation of civil rights, impeded investigations, high amounts of administrative autonomy and lack of institutional control (Baro, 1988; Reutter, 2018; Smolla, 1984;).

While these experiences will be discussed in the future when discussing the traumatic effects of the carceral setting, it is important to highlight the experiences of overcrowded and fast-growing prisons. A person, regardless of the alleged or offense, conviction, or plea enters into the custody and under the care of the carceral setting upon admitting guilt or being found guilty. Carceral setting administrators also assume care of their employees and according to Frank Ferdick (2015), neglect the perceptions of risk, danger, and perceptions of officers and support staff. The intervention of a federal or state government judicial body on a number of prisons gives way to the notion that the rapid growth in the number of prisons occurs in such a way that even administrators are unable to keep up with the pace and demand of carceral settings.

**Building prisons to maintain interests.**

One could consider that the number of prisons serves as a means to maintain financial wellness and control over the racial and economic minorities. A prison economy
is present in the United States of America that allows corporations to maintain that financial interest by tapping into an abundant supply of cheap labor and subsequent profits facilitated by prisons (Thompson, 2012). That consideration is a direct rebuttal to notions that the number of prisons, their sustainability and construction is supported by decades of practices said to “improve” one’s fellow person while protecting the public (Smith & Hattery, 2007; Thompson, 2012).

Scholars have suggested that the practices to maintain financial wellness and control through the use of prisons include capitalism, asset deprivation, and indentured servitude. With monikers such as the “Prison Industrial Complex,” “Jim Crow Justice,” and “modern day slavery” used to describe imprisonment practices, the phenomenon has facilitated the generational deterioration of families of color, in particular (Mancini, 1998; Rosen, 2002; Smith & Hattery, 2007; Thompson, 2012). There has also been an inherent need by the racial majority to exercise economical practices through asset deprivation and the strategical placement of prisons (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Rodriguez & Rolle, 2007).

For more context to this assertion, one may consider that the ability to obtain and maintain land for African Americans was a particularly arduous experience after the abolishment of slavery and one that drastically devalued the land, homes, and crops that were owned and produced (Dyer, Bailey, & Tran, 2009; Hamburger, 1987; Ferleger, 1993; Mitchell, 2000; Schultz, 1998). While refusing to adhere to the abolishment of slavery, those in power simultaneously and strategically placed prisons in or near areas such as plantations and farms, established racial residential segregation, and manipulated the physical land to both contain and separate (Burch, 2014). The geolocations of certain
prisons, particularly those in the southern region of the country, effectively reinforced the notion that escape from slavery or servitude was something that African Americans should not even consider. For instance, prisons such as the Angola State Prison in the State of Louisiana and Parchman Farm, the state prison in Mississippi, are surrounded by a combined 35,000 acres of farm land making it ripe for servitude and difficult to escape due to guard towers, the Mississippi River, the Tunica Hills and wildlife (Forret, 2013). Described by one incarcerated person in Parchman, the experience is “worse than slavery” and one during which the experiences of those incarcerated are placed in a museum for spectacle and public consumption (Mancini, 1998; Ross, 2012; Shankar, 2013).

Approached from social work ethics and a social work perspective, it is imperative to mention that the maintenance of self-interests costs the dignity and self-worth of those incarcerated. The historical practice of subjugating the incarcerated and utilizing servitude as a means to maintain wealth, power, and control can also make one ponder if rehabilitation while in a carceral setting is simply an embellishment of a misleading truth.

**The easy road to incarceration.**

While the practices used to establish, build, maintain and fill prisons are important engagements, it is also important to engage with the practice of policy making, policy implementation and its impact on incarceration. While still a practice, the policies that dictate how one is policed and punished are disparagingly error prone and unfortunately make the process of one being policed, prosecuted, and imprisoned a fairly easy one (Petrova, 2014; Steinmetz, Shcaefer, & Henderson, 2017; Vogel & Porter, 2016). This
section will posit that the following three laws or rulings, also identified as the “Big 3,”
have drastically affected the way in which crime is policed and punished in the United
States of America: The Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, United States vs. Booker, and
the Fair Sentencing Act. While “The Big 3” are macro policies, this section will also
engage with local and state policies to posit that the problem also occurs at the micro and
mezzo levels.

The “Big 3”: Laws that Limit

The following policies are multifaceted and will be deemed as the “Big Three”
because of their impact and response to how certain social actors justify the punishment
of crime: The Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, United States vs. Booker and the Fair
Sentencing Act. As will be explored during an explanation of the acts, it is important to
keep in mind that each of the acts illustrate the difficulty and complexity of how justice
can be carried out after the commission of an illegal offense. Policy makers have
identified the consequences of their policies that were either intended or unintended and
attempted to rectify them. Figure 5 also includes a brief explanation of the three acts.


Responding to the inadequacies and disparities in sentencing perpetuated by
judges in the United States District Court, United States Congress attempted to ensure
uniformity in the way in which a person was sentenced. Prior to the passing of the
Sentencing Reform Act of 1984, judges acted with little to no oversight and at their own
discretion. As a result, many people were often subjected to receiving very different
sentences and judgements for very similar illegal offenses. The passing of the Sentencing
Reform Act of 1984 was the beginning of federal judges no longer being allowed to
deviate from the recommended sentences outlined and agreed upon by congress (Howell, 2004).

The Sentencing Reform Act of 1984 alludes to the debates of rehabilitative versus punitive responses to the commission of illegal offenses and to whom should pass judgement. For the actors of earlier sentencing policies, little was considered of what fulfilled the requirements of rehabilitation while a lot of thought was placed into the manner in which someone should be punished. One can speculate that this caused some distraction and took away from the fact that when one sentences someone to prison, one assumes the responsibility of that person. One consequence of the policy was the general public’s lack of confidence in the fairness and justification of disparaging sentences (Howell, 2004).

The act also became a precursor to discretion and subjectivity being used by a number of court actors through federal sentencing guidelines and a table map (Nutting, 2013). Although rational, the complexities of offenses are larger than what a guideline, algorithm or map can sustain. The manner in which the sentencing disparities were addressed came with the declaration that sentencing practices would show improvements (Howell, 2004). Although after a valiant effort, many policy makers soon realized that the rigidity of guidelines was not sufficient and did not aid in the effective assigning of time for a crime. Judges needed subjectivity and the United States vs. Booker ruling seemed to afford just that.

**U.S. vs. Booker.**

The power held by federal sentencing guidelines shifted from the guidelines and back to the discretion of judges in the 2005 United States Supreme Court decision that
made sentencing guidelines advisory. Under this new rule, judges became free to assign a
prison sentence outside of a recommended sentencing range so long as an explicit reason
for the varying sentence is justified (Lynch & Omori, 2014). Major points of discussion
regarding the shift to advisory sentences have been on how federal criminal courts are
mandated by the same sentencing laws but also how sentencings vary by geographical
location (Lynch & Omori, 2014). This has prompted many to examine how districts are
influenced by historical and regional practices; thus influencing a certain sentencing
culture (Church, 1985; Eisenstein & Jacob, 1977; Holland, 2016; Ulmer & Light, 2011).

The implications from Booker will need to be explored in future writings.
Nevertheless, previous studies on the Booker decision allude to an amalgamation of
issues. Suggestions on offense level calculation bias, prosecutorial bias in deciding which
cases to bring forward, human calculation errors, manipulations of the guidelines and
contrasting findings among where disparities have all occurred and make discretionary
sentencing a top focal point (Bushway, Owens, & Piehl, 2012; Lynch & Omori, 2014;

To illustrate the consequences of the laws, Figure 5 includes a brief description
and overview of each law. Particular attention should be given to the fluctuation in how
one was sentenced. These laws not only fluctuated in how one was sentenced, thus
perpetuating disparities. The laws also failed to retroactively sentence those whom may
have receive disparate sentencings in the past. While persons such as “Mr. Reed”
received some retroactive relief as a result of the law, this is assumed to not be the case
for a number of other incarcerated persons.
Figure 5. The “Big 3” Policies

The Fair Sentencing Act.

In 2010, former president Barack Obama signed into law the Fair Sentencing Act which aimed to reduce the sentencing disparities for first time crack and powder cocaine distributors (American Civil Liberties Union, 2017). In addition to reducing cocaine sentencing disparities, the act also increased the penalties for major drug traffickers, regardless of illegal offense history, while eliminating the minimal sentence for simple possession (Fair Sentencing Act, 2010). The Fair Sentencing Act was a direct response to the disparaging sentencing practices across the country and was another snowball effect of a policy known as the Armed Career Criminal Act. It is worth spending some time
reflecting on the act to suggest how discretionary sentencing is prevalent and unconstitutional.

The vagueness used to draft and implement the Armed Career Criminal Act is exactly why the act was recently modified in a major way. In 1984, and at the height of the cocaine and crack epidemic in the United States of America, legislators declared that a felon who was in possession of a firearm could automatically face up to ten years in prison. The length of time in prison was increased significantly when legislators suggested that a felon being found in possession of a firearm and had three or more earlier convictions for a serious drug offense or violent felony could receive no less than 15 years of prison and up to life in prison (Lamprecht, 2008). Up until 2015, this act allowed a number of law enforcement agencies and federal prosecutors to not only target certain groups of people but to sentence them in the same manner that one would be sentenced for murder. In 2015, the United States Supreme court identified the vagueness of the act and its inability to explicitly highlight what constituted a violent crime. Prior to the ruling for the overturning of a sentence for Samuel Johnson, the namesake of the opinion that impacted the Armed Career Criminal Act, a violent felon was someone classified as a person involved in conduct that presented risk of physical injury to another person (Lamprecht, 2008).

By applying the rules of the Armed Career Criminal Act to the sentencing guidelines of a person charged with illegally possessing a firearm, prosecutors and judges were able to comb through the previous charges of a person and apply some sense of subjectivity to whether or not the person indeed committed a violent offense. For Mr. Johnson, the decision to declare that prior offense in which he possessed a shotgun
should be declared violent was too vague for the Supreme Court and initiated a new calculation of sentences and reductions for a number of people.

The Fair Sentencing Act has prompted explorations into how altering mandatory minimums impact, if even on a small scale, the need to eradicate the mandatory minimum sentences that dominate the sentencing setting (Bjerk, 2017). The Fair Sentencing Act has also prompted a new wave of research and grassroots approaches such as “Ban the Box” which is aimed at removing barriers experienced during reintegration into society from a carceral setting. If the movement succeeds in its endeavors it could potentially assist young African American adult males in their reentry into society as there are currently at least 33.4% of the African-American male population that have a felony record (Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2015).

The pressures and consequences of “controlling” crime.

The “Big 3” illustrate how policy making is a practice that involves revision. Unfortunately, the revisions in policy making are prompted by errors and come at the cost of other persons. In the aforementioned case example, Mr. Reed was faced with arguing that he should not be required to register as a sex offender as a result of the law facilitating his original conviction was no longer a law. In October of 2014, an African American man named Calvin Willis was released from Angola State Prison after being exonerated from an aggravated rape conviction due to a lack of evidence (Palombo, 2005). Mr. Reed’s and Mr. Willis’ experiences are two of many. It is important to focus on those experiences and how the consequences of ill thought out laws and practices facilitate the following outcomes: wrongful imprisonment, asset loss, psychosocial stress to the incarcerated and victims, and death through incarceration or the death penalty.
The aforementioned outcomes of wrongful conviction have been engaged with by scholars and it is worth taking a brief amount of time to engage in conversation on how convictions arise and the implications of wrongful convictions. While the experience of being wrongfully convicted is not the main focal point in the triphasic carceral experience to be mentioned shortly, convictions do serve as another problem indicator of the prison and incarceration experience.

Gould and Leo (2010) have suggested that the following are the sources to which wrongful convictions can be attributed to: eyewitness misidentification, pressured confessions, perjured testimonies, forensic errors, gross prosecutorial misconduct, ineffective assistance of counsel and human calculation errors. In addition to what Gould and Leo suggest, the writer also posits that the shift in various crime bills and policing laws added pressure to law enforcement officials and court officers. For instance, the creation of the Violent Crime and Law Enforcement Act of 1994 or the “Crime Control Act” came after lawmakers argued for the following: an end to “soft” crime prevention programs, for illegally obtained evidence to be admitted into criminal proceedings, a decrease in the number of appeals made by death row inmates and assured payment of restitution to victims (Palmiotto, 1998).

While guised under the call to protect the public and to be tough on crime, the Crime Control Act effectively sanctioned vigilantism and practices utilized by law enforcement to maintain social order even if it meant arresting, detaining, prosecuting, and convicting the wrong person (Packer, 1979; Palmiotto, 1998). Ideologies regarding whom is a criminal and what is criminal activity also arguably justified practices such as
“stop and frisk,” “driving while black,” and “guilty until proven innocent” to be acceptable (Bell, Hopson, Craig, & Robinson, 2014; Rosenfeld & Fornago, 2017; Young, 2004). While the outcome of those practices often includes death of the accused, other outcomes include removal from the country or transitioning from one jurisdictional carceral setting to another (Heide, Spencer, Thompson, & Solomon, 2001; Sybblis, Centeno, & Matos, 2017). This transitioning through settings serves as an exemplar of how one arrest prompts a chain reaction. It also begs one to consider if being a career criminal is an assignment promulgated by policy makers who insist on reinforcing racist, classist, and bigoted hierarchies.

**Becoming lost in rehabilitation versus punishment.**

Briefly returning to the question posed by Jared Kushner regarding the purpose of prisons, it is worthwhile to consider the implications of the continued debate of rehabilitative versus punitive practices. At its core, the debate of criminal sanctioning involves the voices of justice and penance versus care and compassion, as outlined so eloquently in Carol Gilligan’s (1983) model of moral reasoning (Caputo, 2000). The debate with a clear option is needed. This writer poses that the debate has negative implications that are as follows: restrictions on the development of rehabilitative interventions, disparities in the receiving of rehabilitative treatments, and a constant opportunity for overly punitive sentences to be administered (Fox, 1999; Lamberg, 2002; Seiter, 1998)

The argument for overly punitive measures perpetuates the notion of offender accountability, places the onus on learning a lesson on the person incarcerated, prompts an increase in deviant behavior while incarcerated and removes a sense of accountability
from justice system actors (Nagel, 1984; Richards, 2017). It also seems as though the precedent that one is rehabilitated is highly subjective and not embracing of the incarcerated person’s individuality or attitude (Cooper, 1973). To that point, the debate also disregards any possibility that the incarcerated person may be able to serve as an expert to provide opinion in their wellness and rehabilitation. Certainly, some carceral settings foster some autonomy at the local, state, and government level that allow a marriage of the two approaches. Whether the approaches are effective will be determined and discussed in a later section. Nevertheless, the writer agrees with the notion set forth by De Luca, Miller, and Wiedemann (1991) decades ago: the debates prompt inactivity which produces an overburdening and insurmountable fiscal cost to the country.

**Paying the cost.**

The cost of prison construction within the United States of America surpassed $6.5 billion dollars in the 1990s and has since risen (Herrick, 1988; Lillis, 1994). Leaning on the justifications that the incarceration of a person serves as a specific deterrent to crime, the protection of the public and as a means to lower recidivism is costlier (Cullen, Jonson, & Nagin, 2011). This section considers the cost of incarceration and posits that the focal points to the costs of prisons should be on costs that are both legible and obscure.

To explore this consideration further, the dollar amount mentioned at the beginning of this section can be considered a legible cost to prison. This legible cost, or dollar amount, is also what many proponents and opponents to the incarceration process use to make their arguments. For the proponents of incarceration, a mentioning of the prison cost is done for fiscal responsibility purposes and has little to do with the social or
psychosocial ramifications to incarceration. For this approach, a price is placed on justice in which strategies for how states and the federal government can better use their monies for prison is made (Jonson, Eck, & Cullen, 2015). This approach also focuses on economic forces such as tax revenues, public treasuries, the zoning of prisons (Cullen, Jonson, & Nagin, 2011; Fabelo, 1996). While this approach engages with ways to better use the money appropriated for prisons and incarceration, it provides little consideration to the lowering of the cost, cost effectiveness, or incarceration alternatives. Solely focusing on the dollars and cents in this approach does little to address the issues of whom is paying and what is being paid for prison building and maintenance.

It is to that end that the writer suggests combining the clear or eligible dollar amount with the more unclear or obscure costs of prison to posit that the costs of prisons is detrimental and dynamic. Obscure costs of prison and incarceration include itemized or not immediately considered aspects of the cost of prison. Focusing on these costs also provide poignant examples of where taxpayer dollars are used and potentially mis appropriated (Marsh, Fox, & Hedderman, 2009).

For instance, in their exploration into what inmates were being fed, Collins and Thompson (2012) discovered that inmates experienced higher levels of cholesterol, sodium, and other chronic diseases (Collins & Thompson, 2012). This occurred in spite of the prison spending a significant amount of money on food. Another obscure cost of the incarceration experience involves the cost of discipline or infraction. For some prisons, the average cost of administering discipline for an infraction exceeds $950 dollars (Lovell & Jemelka, 1996). What exactly is an infraction and how one is disciplined differs based on the carceral setting. The controlling of crime and obscure
costs of the incarceration experience are also prevalent in immigrant policing and detention. Patler and Golash-Boza (2017) suggest that the arrest, detainment, prosecution, incarceration, and deportation of an alleged “illegal immigrant” is an endeavor prompting a $64 billion-dollar budget for the Department of Homeland Security.

The obscure cost of incarceration also extends to settings in which one is still under the jurisdiction of a court or prison liaison. Strategies to lower the legible or fiscal price of prisons have been posited and consider the following: the implementation of prison diversion programs to downsize prison populations, an increase in the utilization of inmate labor, prison privatization, utilizing technological innovations, and requiring the families of those incarcerated to pay for the costs themselves (Davis, 1990; Jonson, Eck, & Cullen, 2015; Wacquant, 2002; Wexler, Lurigio, Rodriguez, & Blumstein, 2011). While these strategies are assumed to be progressive, they still do not directly give credence to the fact that American taxpayers may be blindly contributing to a system that is deeply flawed and financially abysmal. All of the aforementioned points also serve as indicia that the carceral system is one with gaps and where the high means to incarcerate produce underwhelming, disappointing, and oppressive ends.

**The Dynamics of the Incarceration Experience**

Not mentioned in previous sections regarding the problems within the carceral system was the blatant disregard to the understanding of the experiences of those actually incarcerated. This is even more so echoed by scholars who suggest that the focus should be placed on healing an ailing system and not the assumed “sickened” person (Frazier-Camara, 2013). It is of the writer’s belief that understanding the incarceration experience aids in understanding how to make the experience a morally impactful, economically
efficient, corrective, and humane one. Furthermore, the consideration of the experience alludes to the more human or obscure costs of incarceration that was mentioned earlier.

While Mr. Reed’s lived experience contextualizes the dynamics of incarceration, another example involves those affected in New Orleans, LA and surrounding areas during and after the wake of Hurricane Katrina in 2005. A number of incarcerated people within the Orleans Parish Prison served what has been identified as “Katrina time” and can be defined as follows: a carceral experience during which one is subjected to inhumane living conditions while serving a prison sentence well beyond the statutory requirement as a result of blatant human disregard, inadequate planning and malpractice among justice system actors (The American Civil Liberties Union, 2007).

This section will consider the dynamics of the incarceration experience. The literature allows for it to be posited that the experience is triphasic and composed of the sentencing phase, the span of the prison sentence and the reintegration phase. Identifying the phases serves as a way to identify variables that affect the following topics dominating prison literature and research: arrests, detainment, imprisonment, prison costs and recidivism. I also emphasize the significance of the phases as they each present their own psychosocial stressors, trauma, and focal points for Social Work practitioners working within a justice system setting.

**The triphasic incarceration experience**

**Sentencing.**

The sentencing hearing and act of sentencing a person assumingly ensures the safety of the public and the carrying out of justice for those wronged by an offense. The setting is impacted by social actors such as judges, attorneys and court room officials.
The sentencing setting has also been drastically impacted by policies that have born consequences and disparities among those sentenced (Link & Roman, 2017; Schwartz-Soicher, Geller, & Garfinkel, 2011; Tasca, 2018). For the social work practitioner, it is important to consider the experience of being sentenced and how that experience serves as another indicator of a broken system, promulgates psychosocial stress, and contributes to recidivism. The following reasons are offered to further articulate how and why the sentencing process is such an impactful aspect of the carceral experience: presumed guilt before innocence, disparate sentencings and the articulation and justification of sentencings.

Presumed guilt.

Oftentimes, one’s experience with a carceral setting and social justice actors begins well before one is transferred to the custody of a detention center, jail, correctional facility, or prison. More specifically, there is this notion of doing “Katrina time” or one being arrested for a crime and presumed to be guilty until proven innocent that is so problematic. It is because of this presumption that people – more specifically, people of color – are often deemed to have committed a crime by law enforcement officers, a jury of peers, prosecutors, and judges before any factual evidence is presented (Coffey, 2014; Kern, 2011; Morrison, DeVaul-Fetters, & Gawronski, 2016). With such a presumption on the basis of race, gender, and other variables, many feel the weight of a sentence well before one is pronounced and spend years combating the psychological effects that arise from that experience (Wildeman, Costelloe, & Schehr, 2011).
Disparate sentencings.

Since the passing of the Sentencing Reform Act, plentiful scholarship and policy activity has been dedicated to the declaration that disparities in sentencings persist due to factors such as race, gender, geographical location, socioeconomic status and family ties (Abrams, Bertrand, & Mullainathan, 2012; Clayton, 1983; Nowacki, 2017; Steffensmeier & Demuth; 2006). Although those factors have been debated as to whether or not they are significantly influential, the ruling in the U.S. vs. Booker case determined that mandatory sentencing guidelines should advise federal judges. The behavior in what federal judges exhibit is also being mentioned because judges in lower level courts often mirror said behavior. Under an optimistic premise, it is assumed that the court can take a more analytical and humanistic approach to a defendant and exercise fluidity in sentencings. No longer is a judge restricted to a set of guidelines that suggest that an algorithm can withhold or respond to all of the complexities of human behavior. Assuming a pessimistic response to the ruling, this also made it possible for judges to sentence a defendant below, within, or above an advised guideline range. This ability, combined with the cultures present in a number of courtrooms make it possible for judges to use a heavier hand in sentencings for some when the proverbial “slap on the wrist” occurs for others (Ulmer, 2011).

A recent analysis of sentencing statistics published by the Federal Bureau of Prisons indicated the following: the odds of an African American person receiving a higher sentence than suggested by guidelines increased by 35% when a White person was being sentenced and the probability of receiving a favorable and less punitive sentence decreased by 50% for defendants of color in the Southern region of the country (Davis,
2018). The disparities are fueled by factors that have little to do with the alleged offense and allude to a more punitive and less rehabilitative approach to defendants of color (Jasso, 1998).

Advocates on behalf of those being sentenced, face the difficult task of determining where to target advocative practices when certain policies may unintentionally and covertly add to the disparities (Sorensen, Sarnikar, & Oaxaca, 2012; Spohn & Fornango, 2009). However, much to the chagrin of the aforementioned social actors, the disparities remain and have affected the person of color for generations in a manner that marginalizes and subjugates (Bushway, Owens, & Piehl, 2012). This is a stark contrast to the rehabilitative discourse used when discussing sentencings in America. When those factors are examined, the disparities regarding whom is sentenced and where they are sentenced is apparent (Steffensmeier & Demuth, 2006; Wood, 2007). Discretionary sentencings, when allowed, also prompt disparities that fuel asset deprivation, family separation, and generational inequities among the people of color (Martin, 2011; Rosen, 2002). The laws that dictate what is illegal, various law enforcement practices, the growth in the Prison Industrial Complex, and what most predicts recidivism are all important to understanding the disparate nature of the penal system (Davis & Shaylor, 2001). The activity of sentencing a person adds to those disparities and presents challenges for the soon to be incarcerated person.

Articulation and justification of sentencings.

Words, whether included in policies or used to punish or to celebrate, have power. The frames that judges and other social justice actors invoke in a sentencing hearing serve as the focal point of this section. Because sentencings are carried out by judges, the
notion of understanding the practices and habits of judges as it relates to extralegal factors such as race, gender, and family ties, is also a solid one (Abrams, Bertrand, & Mullainathan, 2012; Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2006; Logue, 2011; Wolbransky, 2012). The writer also posits the following: an agreeance with the Focal Concerns Perspective, that there are defining themes used to justify discretionary and disparate sentencings administered by judges, and that the sentencing process reproduces power differentials based on the use of language.

An approach to sentencing: A Focal Concerns Perspective.

There is a consideration of a certain dialect used among attorneys effectively known as “lawyer speak.” From a practical standpoint, the complex language used among attorneys comes from their legal training and the tenants rooted in Latin (Newman, 2018; Turner, Bone, & Ashton, 2018). From a clinical standpoint, the difficulty in interpreting legalese has often led to frustrations among the clients of attorneys, complaints of ill advisement, and an inability to truly understand what is happening in the courtroom (Assy, 2011; Buckingham, 1996; Ebers, van Wees, Akkermans, Cuijpers, & Bruinvels, 2012). This is assumingly frustrating and stressful for the soon to be incarcerated person. Although the complexity of language used by attorneys is an important dynamic of the justice system, this also ushers in an extension of the phenomena and makes room for the presence of “judge speak.”

The notion of “judge speak” or acknowledging a difference in the manner in which judges make rulings in their courtroom has been given another name known as the “focal concerns perspective.” Coined by a group of researchers, the perspective suggests that a number of judges make their rulings based on irrelevant and limited pieces of legal
information and also on defendant characteristics such as race, gender and age (Demuth & Steffensmeier, 2006; Steffensmeier, Umer, & Kramer, 1998). In its most basic rationale, the perspective suggests that judges allude to or directly reference factors that have no relevance to the offense when justifying their discretionary sentences.

Steffensmeier, Ulmer, and Kramer (1998), suggest that one of the three focal concerns for judges involves assigning blameworthiness to a defendant. Oftentimes, blameworthiness or culpability can be attributed to a number of people or factors. Nevertheless, judges have been identified as assigning blameworthiness to a person from a viewpoint that considers ethnicity, criminal history, and the perceived role in the offense (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). A second focal point, protection of the community, relies on certain physical characteristics and details of the offense to justifiably incapacitate a person (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). This focal point is not suggesting that the protection of the community is not important. This focal point does allude to the fueling of an archetypal “offender,” the assumed dangerousness of an “offender,” and neglects other psychosocial aspects of a person that may have influenced a behavior. As it relates to race, the justification of a disparaging sentence to “protect the community” potentially reinforces the notion that a certain group of people are more dangerous than others while ignoring the fact that being found guilty or pleading guilty to an offense does not solely equate to the commission of the crime.

Although not completely relevant to judge action and judge speak, there are a number of actions ranging from prosecutorial discretion, negotiations between counsel parties and several other factors that occur unbeknownst to a judge or the general public. Whom is being violated and who needs protection may merit attention.
Practical constraints and consequences make up the third component of the focal concerns perspective and suggest that judges’ factor in a person’s “ability to do time” as a justification in sentencings (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). To avoid recidivism, foster rehabilitation and allow the utilization of resources offered in a correctional setting, many judges may feel as though a strenuous sentence is appropriate (Steffensmeier, Ulmer, & Kramer, 1998). Although not directly stated by judges, the focal concerns perspective suggests that sentencing judges are motivated by factors well beyond the scope of the facts of a case when making their rulings. These factors paired with the gendered and ethnic disparities make the themes of perspective worth investigating in the future.

The presumed guilt assigned to certain persons, disparate sentencings and the articulation and justification of sentencings, all impact the experience of a person before even entering a carceral setting. While not mentioned, it should also be noted that human calculation errors in sentencing terms and sentences being served for laws no longer in existence further contextualize the dynamic of the first phase (Bushway, Owens, & Piehl, 2012; Lippke, 2018). These examples were mentioned to illustrate the ways in which the system and not those incarcerated is broken. The experience of being sentenced is one that is punitive and further suggests that the debate of whether practices should punish or rehabilitate is futile. This consideration aids in understanding the experiences of those incarcerated and builds upon suggestions that punitive practices are ineffective and deeply embedded into carceral approaches.
Completing the sentence.

The second major phase of the carceral experience involves the actual serving of a prison sentence in a carceral setting. For continued clarity, the mentioning of a carceral setting refers to detention centers, correctional institutions, prisons, halfway houses, civil commitment centers, holding cells, and miscellaneous spaces used to detain a person under the jurisdiction of a judicial court at the local, state, and federal level. This stage is highly individualized. For the social work practitioner, it is important to engage with this phase to inform considerations and approaches. The following reasons are offered to further articulate how and why the second phase is such an impactful aspect of the carceral experience and one worth considering: debunking the myth of the experience, variations in one’s commitment to custody, and incarceration as a lived experience.

The myths of incarceration.

Assuming that the social work practitioner is participating in some form of advocacy while engaging with the incarcerated person, it is very important to understand the facts as it relates to being incarcerated. One is effectually telling the story of a marginalized group of people and should therefore tell the story as accurately as possible. The writer feels as though this is vital to filling the gaps that have already been mentioned. Furthermore, seldomly do those authoring justice policies or proponents of more punitive practices explore what occurs in a prison setting. There is a sort of blindness or ambivalence to their practice. As termed by Jeffrey Ross (2015), this “prison voyeurism” or lackadaisical approach to understanding the experience is an attempt to feign one’s understanding of the prison experience without intimately engaging with the experience. One cannot view documentaries, read sensationalized material, and use
assumptions to be a prison expert. This lack of engagement also fuels a disillusionment that being tough on crime pays and allows for further perpetuation of the following myths: that prison serves as a haven for the development of criminals and criminal activity, prisons serve as a total institution diminishing the desire to participate in criminal behavior, and that the incarcerated person is bestial and illiterate (Dennis, 2000; Farrington, 1992; Rankin, 2005). Failing to debunk the myths of the incarceration experience clouds perception, misinforms one’s practice, and does an injustice to those incarcerated.

**Variances in commitment and custody.**

While involving more technicalities and definitions, understanding variations in one’s commitment and custody can aid in understanding the phase of sentence completion. As alluded to in the aforementioned section detailing sentencing, a number of those incarcerated in prison serve time in a carceral setting prior to an adjudication of guilt or innocence (Kim, Chauhan, Lu, Patten, & Smith, 2018). When guilt is either admitted or a person has been adjudicated, that time is either credited to a person towards the completion of a longer sentence or completely disregarded. While also a discretionary practice for judges and prosecutors, demographic variables very much so affect one receiving or not receiving credit for time served and can be a very stressful and costly experience (Baughman, 2017; Clear, Hewitt, & Regoli, 1978; Menefee, 2018). Akin to slavery, there is also a notion of custody that is very challenging for those completing their sentence. Once one is committed to the custody of a carceral setting, one loses the ability to freely move about and dictate where one can be for the remainder of a sentence. For context, in the experience of Mr. Reed, he and his person were in the custody of the
Federal Bureau of Prisons throughout his prison sentence and will be in the custody of the United States Probation Office and a United States District Court until the completion of his probation. This is a long and arduous experience. Mr. Reed’s experience also does not include having to serve sentences consecutively after being found guilty in multiple courts. While a life sentence typically means that a person is serving all or a majority of one’s life in prison, it should be considered that a lesser sentence still requires life-long commitments.

The lived experience.

Many of those incarcerated are very much aware that a control of the body and one’s movements come with the experience. Nevertheless, there is still an understanding that one must not only survive but live and thrive during this phase of the experience. An informed Shawn Carter, also known as JAY Z, articulated the following in his vocal performance on incarceration: “Forgettin’ (forgetting) all I ever knew, convenient amnesia, I suggest you call my lawyer, I know the procedure, lock my body, can’t trap my mind, easily explain why we adapt to crime (Carter, Lorenzo, Davis, & Bacharach, 1996).” There is a suggestion based on those words and from other scholars that the incarceration experience is one during which the incarcerated person should reflect on the history of the American carceral setting to better educate, advocate and grow (Kennedy, 2017). It is important to keep this aspect of the experience in mind when advocating for practices that are rehabilitative, humane, and sensitive to one’s individual experience. A consideration that one is entitled to a healthy living experience may be difficult for some to understand. This may also be a difficult to argue against for the social work practitioner. Nevertheless, as alluded to when discussing how easy it is for certain
persons to be incarcerated, one can suggest the following: Assuming that every person incarcerated is guilty of the crime for which one is charged is unfair, irresponsible, and undermining of a due process system.

**Reintegration.**

The phase of reintegration is the final stage of the carceral experience, one that is highly dynamic, and one that is more complex than simply walking out of a carceral setting. It should be the goal of the social work practitioner and social justice actors for reintegration to be as healthy as possible. It is worth engaging with this phase as the fear of being labeled an “ex offender” or “violent offender” is crippling to one’s psyche and self confidence in abilities to be self-sufficient into a less restrictive environment (Kroska, Lee, & Carr, 2017; Solinas-Saunders, Stacer, & Guy, 2015). How one is educated on one’s reintegration tasks, how one perceives oneself, and how one is able to maintain a healthy lifestyle are all factors that have an impact on a healthy reintegration process (Klein, 2018; Langevin, et al., 2004; White & Malesky, 2009). The following reasons are offered to further articulate how and why the third phase that is reintegration is such an impactful aspect of the carceral experience and one worth considering: the linkage to recidivism, the communal dynamic, and variations in how freedom is experienced.

**Linkage to recidivism.**

The variables through which reintegration and recidivism are most affected are intertwined and intersect at race, gender, policies, education, employment, familial ties and self-worth (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Hatcher, 2010; Martin, 2011; Swanson, Lee,
Sansone, & Tatum, 2012; Truesdale-Moore, 2015). Offered by the State of Louisiana (2018), recidivism can be defined as follows: A return to custody following conviction for a new felony or technical revocation of supervision after having been released from incarceration through completed sentence, paroled release, conditional release, or split probation sentence. While engaging with what most effects recidivism rates go beyond the scope of this paper, one may consider the following when considering the relationship between recidivism and reintegration: 63% of persons released from incarceration recidivate within 36 months of release, white male recidivism rates are far less than black or African American recidivism and access to social resources and capital effects recidivism rates (Reisig, Bales, Hay & Wang, 2007; Palermo, 2009; Wright & Collins, 2008). The focus on recidivism rates remaining high is potentially futile as it fails to indicate that the carceral setting is not corrective, punitive, nor rehabilitative in the manner in which it should be (Ganapathy, 2018). For full consideration, there are programs aimed at reducing recidivism. The writer, in spite of those programs and efforts, is suggesting that the link between reintegration and recidivism is yet another source of banter similar to rehabilitation versus punishment. One can focus on the recidivism rates and lose an awareness of the aforementioned issues. While recidivism rates undoubtedly justify the construction and upholding of the carceral setting, they also undermine an experience that is costly in more ways than one.

*The communal dynamic.*

By briefly returning to the experience of Mr. Reed, he indicated that he was apprehensive about having to register as a sex offender. This registration was to occur despite the law under which he was found guilty no longer being in existence. The social
stigma that accompanies one having to register as a sex offender places a burden on the reintegrating person and every person within his or her system (Burchfield, 2006; Jung, Allison, & Martin, 2018; Yeh, 2015). Mr. Reed recognized that the stigma would be present and that the act of registering meant having to interact with people on a very personal level. For the reintegrating person, there is also a high degree of reliance on others. The legalese regarding the registration process can be difficult to understand and is often better understood by the justice involved person if requirements are explained and discussed in a slow and thoughtful manner (Abenoza & Arjona, 2017; Assy, 2011). As posited by Deirdre Healy (2012), a welfare oriented and systems approach by a probation officer will assumingly produce healthy outcomes for the reintegrating person. Along with the probation officer comes multidisciplinary and interagency collaborations to ensure the wellness of the reintegrating person and the community. This aspect of the reintegration phase interlopes various opinions, agendas, and powers that should be considered.

Variations in the experience of freedom.

An additional aspect of reintegration to consider is the experience of freedom and how it varies amongst those whom were previously incarcerated. This disparities from sentencings extend to freedom and are different based on demographic variables such as race, gender, family ties and socioeconomic status. While finding employment after incarceration is one of the largest obstacles faced by the reintegrating person, it is disheartening to know that the employment rates for low-skill opportunities is much higher for White previously incarcerated people than it is for African-American men (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011). This disparity among experiences is also mediated by race
and offense type (Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2010). Employers deemed drug possession charges, for example, as less desirable for hire while no criminal history was preferred (Varghese, Hardin, Bauer, & Morgan, 2010). Employers have also suggested a willingness to hire and train PIPs for low-skill jobs in one instance, only to declare that they would not when asked later (Pager & Quillian, 2007). Furthermore, to be an African-American man reintegrating into the community means to be a person whom will experience higher amounts of child support debt, poor mental health statuses, asset deprivation, and an overall diminish life capacity attributed to racism (Martin, 2011; Nixon, et al., 2008).

As indicated in Figure 6, the three phases of the carceral experience are unique and symbiotic. The phases are intended to serve as an exemplar to the highly dynamic experience that is incarceration. The symbiotic or fluid nature of the phases also suggests two very critical points on which this writing presents: the ease for one to become entrenched in the phases and that phases prompt a high level of biopsychosocial stress among those incarcerated and their families.

Figure 6. The Triphasic Experience
The following section will posit that the triphasic experience is not only traumatic but racially traumatic and one needing attention from the social work practitioner.

**The Traumatic Phases of Incarceration**

Often not mentioned when discussing the problems within the carceral system is the blatant disregard to the understanding of the experiences of those incarcerated. This is irresponsible and disregards race, gender, class, and other variables affecting the incarceration experience. This is even more so echoed by scholars who suggest that the focus should be placed on healing an ailing system and not the assumed “sickened” person (Frazier-Camara, 2013). It is of my belief that understanding the incarceration experience aids in understanding how to make the experience a morally impactful, economically efficient, corrective, and humane one. Furthermore, the consideration of the experience alludes to the more human or not easily identifiable costs of incarceration. It has been posited by way of reviewing the literature that the experience is made up of at least three phases which include the sentencing phase, the span of the prison sentence and the reintegration phase (Cid & Marti, 2017; Doherty, Forrester, Brazil, & Matheson, 2014).

**Experiencing trauma while being sentenced.**

One may consider that the average sentencing hearing is an event lasting for a few minutes but impacting many for a lifetime. With respect to victims of an alleged offense, the writer suggests that the process of being sentenced to serve a specific amount of time in prison, death, probation, or to a setting during which one’s autonomy is removed, is traumatic. For context, the experience of being unjustly sentenced after a wrongful conviction has been described as a jarring one that “a lot of people go insane behind
(DeShay, 2016).” That many previously incarcerated people sue various courts and file for compensation statutes as a result of receiving a wrongful sentence, also suggests that the sentencing hearing can be traumatic (Simms, 2016). While it has been suggested that defense advocacy include a trauma-informed approach to mitigating circumstances on behalf of a client, it may be worthwhile to be sensitive to the stress experienced during the sentencing hearing (Gohara, 2018).

**Experiencing trauma while incarcerated.**

It is with this in mind that I utilize the literature and posit that the following framework may be used to simply categorize the trauma experienced while completing a sentence in a carceral setting: Trauma originating from a primary or peer source (TOPS) and trauma originating from a secondary or system source (TOSS). A depiction of the framework may also be found in Figure 7.

**Figure 7. The Traumatic Incarceration Experiences Framework**

When exploring the trauma experienced during incarceration, it is important to consider the trauma perpetuated by a fellow incarcerated person or peer. If one subscribed to the myths of incarceration or “prison voyeurism,” this trauma includes acts
of violence, sexual assault, and extortion often depicted in the media and assumed to happen in prison. While some of the peer to peer acts of stress and trauma may be embellished for entertainment, the acts do occur and should be given credence. As many as 17% of the current incarcerated population report being sexually assaulted despite efforts from the National Prison Rape Elimination Commission (NPREC) (Struckman-Johnson & Struckman-Johnson, 2013). Other forms of stress, often predicated by the more than 100,000 identified members of gangs, are often perpetuated by the following actions: violence, intimidation, extortion, revenge, boundary imposition, rumor spreading, and gained power by control (Elliott, 2006).

The other suggested category of trauma experienced in a carceral setting is trauma perpetuated by a secondary or system source. These sources of trauma are any source other than a peer or fellow incarcerated person. For example, system sources of trauma include overcrowding, other deplorable living conditions or inconsiderate policy changes. These sources are a part of a larger system such as the Prison Industrial Complex. Prison personnel or carceral setting actors are also considered to be secondary sources of trauma. For instance, the financial and institutional corruption often investigated, prosecuted, and penalized produces traumatic effects for the incarcerated person that has not been explored in full (Souryal, 2009).

**Experiencing trauma during reintegration.**

Reintegrating into the community or into an environment less restrictive than a typical carceral setting is difficult. When considering the traumatic experience involved in reintegration, at least two experiences come into concentration: experiencing discrimination and the assigning of labels. While the pressures of obtaining employment,
maintaining a family, adjusting to new schedules and new expectations may be stressful, those stressors may not be necessarily perpetuated by an outside source. The discrimination, even down to the practices used by employers is equally interesting and damaging. Incarcerated people, across the gambit, are publicly perceived in a whimsical fashion and described as being positive perpetrators while others are employed “off of the books” to maintain a positive image to the public and the employer (O’Donnell & Jewkes, 2011; Ramakers, van Wilsem, Nieuwbeerta, & Dirkzwager, 2014).

The assigning of labels is also a traumatic experience and one that all incarcerated people endure apprehensively. Scholars have also been engaged with the detriments of assigning labels and have concluded the following once the label of “delinquent” or “criminal” has been attributed: a person is prompted to think of oneself negatively, one is encouraged to participate in crimes that increase one’s recidivism, and one is prompted to experience negative treatment by members of other members of society (Ascani, 2012; Kroska, Lee, & Carr, 2017). The fear of being labeled an “ex offender” or “violent offender” is crippling to their psyche and self confidence in their abilities to obtain employment and reintegrate into a less restrictive environment (Kroska, Lee, & Carr, 2017; Solinas-Saunders, Stacer, & Guy, 2015).

**Trauma experienced during incarceration.**

Adding to the assumption that the proposed second phase of the carceral experience is saturated with violence and aggression, vocal artist Alvin Worthy provides insight into his experience by stating the following: “Gadda (Got to) have 20 (men) with me at commissary, (If you) Owe me a stamp, get your mama buried (Worthy, 2018).” While it is clear that those whom have been incarcerated describe their incarceration
experience as traumatic, the literature focuses on an array of topics not related to experiencing trauma while incarcerated. Some of those topics include and are assumingly not limited to the following: experiencing Post Traumatic Stress Disorder after release, a prevalence of sustained Traumatic Brain Injury (TBI) among newly incarcerated people, or experienced trauma prior to incarceration (Karatzia, et al., 2018; Mitchell, Theadom, & du Preez, 2017; Vanhooren, Leijssen, & Dezutter, 2018). The following types of trauma can also be experienced in any phase of the carceral experience: secondary trauma, sexual trauma, medical trauma, traumatic loss and stressful reactions as a result of natural disasters. Because the incarceration experience in America is highly racialized, racial trauma will be the focal point of this proposed study.

**Racial trauma.**

Race, serving as a demographic variable, affects the carceral experience. Returning briefly to the experience of Mr. Reed’s experience as an incarcerated African American male, his racial experience was not explored by those advocating on his behalf. By doing so, one would have understood Mr. Reed’s strong connection to his birthplace due to its history regarding race. Mr. Reed’s apprehension of the justice system, his identity status, and his perceptions of how he has been treated based on race better tell his story and mitigate his stressful circumstances.

It has already been offered in this writing that policing, sentencing, incarceration, and recidivism disparities occur most frequently for the African American person. Scholars have further emphasized the importance of considering race in the carceral setting by focusing on the following: how prosecutors seek higher penalties for people of color, how people of color carry presumed guilt based on appearing to be a person of
color, how the public views the ways in which people of color should be sentenced more harshly (Johnson & King, 2017; Singh & Sprott; 2017; Spohn & Fornango, 2009; Whiting, 2009). For the African American person and other persons of color, the carceral experience is one that is often insensitive to race, despite callings by Sule, et. al. (2017) to utilize a nurturing perspective to race and ethnicity in forensic social work practices.

While not directly stated, it has been alluded to that policing, sentencing, incarceration, and recidivism disparities occur most frequently for the African American person (Bellair & Kowalski, 2011; Kamalu & Onyeozili, 2018; Shjarback, Pyrooz, Wolfe, & Decker, 2017). Scholars have further emphasized the importance of considering race in the carceral setting by focusing on the following: how prosecutors seek higher penalties for people of color, how people of color carry presumed guilt based on appearing to be a person of color, how the public views the ways in which people of color should be sentenced more harshly (Johnson & King, 2017; Singh & Sprott; 2017; Spohn & Fornango, 2009; Whiting, 2009; ). For the African American person and other persons of color, the carceral experience is one that is often insensitive to race, despite callings by Sule, et. al. (2017) to utilize a nurturing perspective to race and ethnicity in forensic social work practices. One would be remised to assume that these experiences do not perpetuate feelings of stress, discomfort, and confusion as a result of actions in response to one’s race.

**Summary.**

Throughout the writing, thoughts on exactly how social workers address and assess the traumatizing experience of arrest, sentencing, incarceration, and reintegration have been at a constant. Identifying, considering, and mitigating the stressors experienced
by Mr. Reed and his peers, is one way to address the issues. The intersections of social work and the legal system are many and merit a continuous examination that social work practitioners are able to extend services. Furthermore, the call for social workers to be present in forensic settings is not as new as the ponderings on where to be present and what tasks to pursue on behalf of the client (Brownell & Roberts, 2002). Oftentimes misunderstood or defined loosely, forensic or justice system social work has often been deemed as an area of social work limited to the education of law professionals about psychosocial issues in law enforcement or criminal justice settings (Barker, 1995; Brownell & Roberts, 2002). This thought also extends to the social work practitioner delving deeper into the racial implications of certain social policies. As discussed by Franke, Treglia, and Cnaan (2017), encouraging social work practitioners to examine policies and practices that reinvigorate the “punitive spirit” have everything to do with advocacy and maintaining the dignity of what some policies aim to accomplish. Engaging with Critical Race Theory or a race-centered perspective also extends the tenants of culturally sensitive practices of social work, while generating public awareness and attention to real disparaging issues (Teasley, Schiele, Adams, & Okilwa, 2018).

The justification and need for social work advocacy within and around the penal system also comes as a direct response to a push for more advocative practices of justice system actors of attorneys and to policies that call for more rehabilitative approaches to better serve the client (Purdy & Gelpi, 1997; Schroeder, Guin, Pgue, & Bordelon, 2006). The suggestion of meeting the clients on their level and going the extra mile to refute penal narratives have surfaced in trainings for attorneys but have also been practices utilized by the social work practitioner for quite some time, respectfully (Assy, 2011;
Elbers, et al., 2012; Newman, 2018; Turner, Bone, & Ashton, 2018). Furthermore, the call for a number of public criminal defense settings to instill holistic models that move beyond the assessment of behavior of approach make it an ideal setting for social workers to establish agency, the tasks more defined, and allow for more education to judges on psychosocial issues in an even more concise manner (Buchanan & Nooe, 2017; Cummins, 2017; Redding & Hensl, 2011). The thought that social workers should and most certainly could contribute to the courtroom and legal advocacy comes from the inclination for budding social work practitioners to further their learning aspects of the area (Kubiak & Milanovic, 2017). The American justice system is vast and complex. Nevertheless, understanding the complexities is a developmental milestone that students seem to clamor for and a recognition that social workers serve as a bridge to effective advocacy between many of those complexities (Scheyett, Pettus-Davis, McCarter, & Brigham, 2012; Walker, 2002; Warde, 2014; Wormer, 2006).

By viewing psychosocial stressors through a social work lens, one approaches those stressors with a level of competence, advocacy, and ethical responsibilities that are nurturing to the client, the practice setting, the colleague, and to the broader society. This lens, influenced heavily by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics (2017), has shaped social work practitioners for decades and influenced a plethora of social work practices, considerations and policies. While the constructs of race, racism and racism-based stress are complicated, the review of the literature has attempted to engage with them and suggest that social work practitioners are able to add to the knowledge regarding racism-based stress.
Thoughts on exactly how social workers address and assess racism-based stress have been at a constant. Ultimately, social workers complete the aforementioned tasks by engaging in what the field has historically called for: meet the client where the client is. Even still, the literature does not give credence to visualizing where a person of color comes from, their experience, or the messages being conveyed. The literature also relies heavily on a very rigid approach to engaging with the client. This is a problem when the signs and symptoms regarding trauma from racism are often recognizable and blatant.

This study proposes to evaluate the role and experiences of justice system advocates whom practice in one of the incarceration settings. This study also places special emphasis on the experience of social workers and the upholding of the following codes of ethics that guide the discipline: Section 1.05 Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity, Section 2.10 Respect, Section 3.02 Education and Training, Section 4.02 Responsibility as Professionals regarding Discrimination (National Association of Social Workers NASW, 2017). Throughout the study, thoughts on exactly how social workers address and assess the racially traumatizing experience of arrest, sentencing, incarceration, and reintegration will be at a constant.
CHAPTER 3: METHOD

This chapter will include a more detailed description of the research design. To reiterate the purpose of the study, this study proposed to evaluate the role and experiences of social workers serving as advocates within a justice system or carceral setting while maintaining a focal point on racism experienced by the incarcerated person. Because the study is an endeavor to understand the ways in which justice system social workers perceive the justice system and the construct of racism-based trauma, a 22-item questionnaire was created to elicit opinions and information. This chapter will include the rationale for the questions and their relevance to the study. In addition to rationalizing why the method of qualitative interviews will be used, the chapter will also discuss the sampling method, data collection, data analysis strategy and study limitations. The chapter begins with a discussion on the research design and a justification for taking a qualitative approach in the study.

Research Design

Engaging with the construct of racism-based trauma and considering the incarceration experience to be racially traumatic require that the justice system social worker believe in the merit of the construct and that the incarceration experience can be racially traumatic. This study is an effort to understand the feelings, motivations, and perceptions of justice system social workers as they engage with racism-based trauma in their practice settings. To be franker, this study is an attempt to understand phenomena to better help the helper. It is because of this attempt that the qualitative inquiry method of semi-structured interviews will be utilized. Utilizing this approach arises from the work
of qualitative methodology scholars and the notion that the method should be used to hear
the story and understand human complexities (Cresswell, 2003; Olive, 2008).

This approach also mirrors studies of a similar nature. For instance, in M.P.
Melendrez’s (2008) dissertation work on the exploration of cultural competence among
budding social work practitioners, semi-structured interviews were conducted to allow
participants an opportunity to indicate their readiness and apprehension as it related to
engaging with culturally competent social work practice. Similarly, this methodology will
fit well into the inquiry into what advocates believe are the benefits and challenges to
engaging with racism-based trauma for the first time. As indicated in study by H.K.
Badwall (2013), many social workers and justice-system advocates situate their practice
behavior in the ponderance of whether or not they are “being a good social worker” and
whether or not they adhere to ethical codes of their profession. In the study, Badwall
(2013), also noticed that social workers familiarity with codes of ethics shrouded them
from actively engaging with racism and prevented them from being aware of their racial
presence.

The ability to ask one questions about their professional experiences, especially in
regard to race, will serve well in finding the anticipated results of one’s sensitivity to race
and racial identity, and a heightened sense of awareness with the practitioner. The
research is also attempting to establish that the incarceration experience, in all of its parts,
is racially traumatic. The phenomenon of incarceration being an issue in the country is
well stated.

In S.I. Tonge’s (2014) qualitative study, social workers made meaning of the
carceral experience and identified issues within the system. In each of the research
questions, goals, and anticipated results is the underlying theme of how important it is for one to be aware of oneself in order to be a better advocate. The qualitative inquiry of semi-structured interviews allows one to ask guiding questions and for the interviewee to provide narrative answers and real-life experiences. As will be discussed briefly in the following subsections, the qualitative interview also allows for the discovery of new information, an operationalization of variables and for “placement” to occur.

**Placing oneself.**

The interview process for this study is intended to be symbiotic. While the interviewee will provide narratives and disclosures about their professional experiences, this will also prompt the researcher to reflect on personal experiences. This exchange of information and reflexivity is also alluded to in the notion of “placement” during which one places their experiences in context of another (Edwards, 1993; Probst, 2015). This may be helpful in a number of contexts but especially so when engaging with a sensitive topic such as race and the justice system. Placing oneself during the interview mirrors the intervention dyad. This aspect of the qualitative interview also allows the participants to experience placing oneself as it relates to race and allows the researcher to begin to posit on engaging and assessing with racism-based trauma.

**Discovering new information.**

Another motivation for using this approach relies on Barney Glaser and Anselm Strauss’ (1967) concept of grounded theory, generative knowledge, the ability to discover and build on new theories from the data. While not a study purely engaged with grounded theory, the study utilized a grounded theory approach. This project involves helping the helper and also letting the experts speak on their experiences. It is intended to impact
intervention practices and policies. There is definitely some fluidity or abduction involved in this approach and this fits it well. Unlike quantitative data and studies that can be replicated, this study is purposely examining the individualized experiences of the practitioner. A narrative detailing those individualized experiences allows for the practitioner to establish some voice and agency when discussing race. These experiences also guide future research questions and aid in creating axioms that can be used to help other practitioners.

**Operationalizing variables.**

Qualitative interviews also serve as a means to identify variables that are key elements in social processes and experiences (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). While the research questions and study goals have been stated, an overarching consideration of what most affects recidivism rates is present. A number of variables affect the reintegration process. One of those variables may involve risk factor variables and one of those “risks” may be that of race. The racial experience may affect the recidivism process and this study will attempt to understand that. Questions such as whether or not the experience is racially traumatic will guide future studies where the incarcerated person of color is the participant.

**Data Collection**

**Interview questionnaire.**

No more than thirteen interviews were completed, and interviewees were recruited through in person contact and email. The inclusion criteria are discussed below in the subsection on Sampling and Eligibility Criteria. While the questions were formalized, there were follow-up questions asked to elicit further detail or clarity. To that
end, the interviews were semi-structured. The interview questions were intended to aid in the answering of the research questions and to reach the anticipated results. Interview questions may also be found in Appendix A: Interview Questions. The questionnaire includes twenty-two items that are grouped into one of the following categories: Professional Experience, The Incarceration Experience, The Extent of Engagement, The Benefits and Challenges of Engagement and Closing. A more detailed explanation as to how and why the questions are grouped into categories can be found in the following subsections.

**Professional experience.**

These questions were asked to build rapport and to identify how practitioners see themselves. How one identifies professionally is important for a couple of reasons. To avoid assigning job titles and occupations to the participants, they had the opportunity to speak for and identify themselves. This identification also allowed the researcher to analyze the differences in how practitioners with degrees in Social Work define and engage with racism-based trauma. These questions also established whether or not the participant is familiar with the prison or incarceration experience.

**Considering the incarceration experience.**

Once some rapport was built and the participants indicated that they engaged in justice system advocacy work, the questions then transitioned to their thoughts on the incarceration experience. These questions allowed the participant to reflect on their experiences with the justice system and what has been reported to them by their clients. Because the focus of the study is on racism-based trauma, asking about any racial disparities noticed while working was important. The research was also striving to
establish that the incarceration experience is a dynamic one and one during which stress occurs. Therefore, asking the participant what he or she believed to occur before or after a client comes into contact with them, served the study well. An exploration into whether or not the participant believed the experience that they mentioned to be physically and emotionally stressful ended the questions in the “Prison Experience” section. It was important that the words “trauma” or “racism-based trauma” were not used in the question as to avoid leading the participant to an answer because this was the focus of the next set of questions.

The extent of engagement.

During this section of the questionnaire, the investigator is attempting to explore to what extent the participants have engaged with race and racism-based trauma. The first two questions in this section rely on the previous question of observed physical and emotional stress to orient the participant to trauma. More specifically, the participants were asked in what ways have they been trained, read scholarship, or taken a trauma-informed approach in their work. These questions allowed the participants to engage with their practice experience on a larger known construct before focusing on something as nuanced as racism-based trauma.

The following two questions aided in answering the third research question. These questions served as one of the simplest ways to learn how justice system social workers have engaged with racism-based trauma. The question of “how you would explain the construct of racism-based trauma to a colleague or client,” was worded as such to communicate that participants have the freedom to define the definition. Furthermore, this was an opportunity for the participant to practice defining the term. This approach
had implications as to how justice system social workers define and present the construct to clientele and colleagues. Carter and other scholars found that that a successful engagement with the construct involves how well one understands and articulates the construct (Carter, et al., 2013). The next question in the section regarding training or being exposed to racial identity development prompted the participant to think about their skills and comfortability with their racial identity and the identity of others. The last question of what clients have disclosed to them about their racialized experience while being a justice system involved person is another attempt to advance the claim that the justice system experience is particularly racially traumatic. The responses will also aid in the development of questionnaires presented to actual justice system involved persons.

**The benefits and challenges of engagement.**

While the researcher feels as though an engagement with one’s race and racial experience is beneficial in the intervention dyad, it is important to learn what other practitioners think and feel. This section of questions was also used to inform the practice and teaching of social work practitioners and other advocates. A question about how comfortable one feels discussing experiences of racial discrimination, racial harassment, and racial oppression is included in the survey to focus on the wellness of the practitioner. It was important that an engagement with race is done in a healthy way and that the practitioner feels comfortable in his role when discussing race.

**Closing.**

During this section of the questionnaire, a healthy close will occur. Participants will be allowed to add any additional information that they would like to add or that they
feel was missed during the interview. This is also an attempt to encourage optimism, review any concerns, and avoid any abrupt endings (Thompkins, Sheard, & Neale, 2008).

Participants were also asked to identify themselves based on their race and gender. This was for demographical information purposes and so that the researcher does not assign a race or gender to the participant. Participants were also asked what university they graduated from and what year that they graduated. The type of education, education setting, race, and gender, may influence some benefits, challenges, and perceptions of the racism-based trauma construct and incarceration.

**Sampling and Eligibility Criteria**

The purposive sampling method was used for this study. While the justice system is composed of a number of actors, the actors are often divided into defending the accused and prosecuting the accused. This study focuses on those social work practitioners engaging in the defense and advocacy of the justice involved person in any phase of the incarceration experience. These practitioners engage in advocacy practices that involve defending the justice involved person, offering mitigating circumstances for lesser penalties, and engage in evidence-based interventions with the incarcerated person to alleviate the psychosocial stress prompted by the experience. To be considered an eligible participant, the interviewee must have met the following criteria: be between the ages of 21 and 70, hold a baccalaureate, masters, or doctoral degree in Social Work and currently serve as an advocate for clients and practice social work within a justice system setting. The justice system setting in which one practices can range. Possible practice settings that will meet eligibility requirements and serve as targets for recruitment are as follows: state and federal public defender offices, prisons at the local, state, and federal
level, community reentry centers, grassroots organizations, advocacy centers and private practice settings.

**Recruitment strategies.**

Study participants were recruited via email to gauge interest in the study and to schedule interviews. Recruitment occurred from December 2018 to February 2019. Regarding the dissemination of emails for recruitment, I searched various agency websites for contact information of employees whom were either titled or identified as a social worker. This involved searching the websites of federal defense attorney agencies throughout the country and the subsequent recruitment emails being sent to 15 potential participants possessing the title of Social Worker and Investigator. Five potential participants working as social workers within various city public defender offices were also recruited via email. The city public defender offices were identified by searching for offices in major cities. A Google.com search of “forensic social workers,” “social justice equality,” and “reentry center social workers” yielded the contact information of at least two social workers working within a reentry center and a social worker working at a center focusing on initiating criminal justice. One social worker was recruited via email and subsequently in person after discovering that the social worker practiced locally.

**Participant demographics and information.**

Of the twenty-five participants who were recruited, thirteen responded and committed to participating in the study. This subsection will provide demographical descriptions of the participants based upon self-identified race, gender, sex, work setting, length of time in work setting, and when graduation from either an accredited baccalaureate or master level social work program occurred. The following tables are
also included to give more demographical information: Table 1.1 Participants’ Racial Demographics, Table 1.2 Participants’ BSW and MSW Program, Table 1.3 Participants’ BSW Year of Graduation, Table 1.4 Participants’ MSW Year of Graduation.

It should be noted that the participants will be identified using a pseudonym to maintain an ethical obligation to protecting their anonymity and confidence. These descriptions also provide context for the reader and allow the reader to follow which participant responded. I will also note that the American Psychological Association’s formatting guidelines will be used to provide direct quotes and narratives.

**Participant profiles.**

**Harriet.**

Harriet is currently serving as a senior level social worker within a federal public defense office in the Southeastern region of the country. Harriet’s formal job title has been withheld in an attempt to better protect her identity. For more than a decade, Harriet has been working in the field of Social Work with men and women whom have been indicted and prosecuted by the United States of America. Her work is primarily with men and women of color living in a district in the Southeast. Harriet identifies as an African-American woman. Harriet earned her Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree sometime in the 1990s and her Master of Social Work (MSW) degree sometime after the year 2000.

**Mia.**

Mia is currently serving as an advocate and Social Worker within a federal public defense office in the Southeastern regions of the country. Mia has been working in the field of Social Work for about four years. Currently, Mia works with people whom have been indicted by and are currently being prosecuted by the United States of America in a
district in the State of Florida. More specifically, Mia’s identifies her clients as being either African-American or LatinX men and women. Mia identifies herself as being an African-American woman. Mia earned her BSW and MSW at some point after the year 2010.

Meghan.

Meghan, who identifies as a White, cisgender, female, serves as a Social Worker and advocate for justice involved children and adults. More specifically, Meghan is tasked with assisting young adults attempting to complete drug court requirements through a third-party social service agency in the Southeastern region of the country. While not working much with women, Meghan works with a racially diverse group of men. Meghan earned her BSW and MSW at some point after 2010.

Rose.

Rose is currently in year five of her work as a Social Worker within a federal public defense office in the Southeastern region of the country. During her clientele, Rose’s clientele has predominately included men and women of color indicted and prosecuted by the United States government within a federal criminal district in the Southeast. Rose identifies as a White woman and graduated with her BSW in after the year 2000 and before the year 2008.

Angela.

Angela is currently serving as Director of Social Work within a federal public defense office in the Northeastern region of the country. She serves a racially diverse group of men and women indicted and prosecuted in a district within in Northeast on behalf of the United States government. Angela has been working in her current job since
earning her MSW sometime after 2009. Angela earned her BSW in the early 200s and identifies as a Black-Puerto Rican woman.

_Nasir._

Nasir, who identifies as an African-American male, works as a Social Worker specializing in mitigation services in a federal public defense office. Nasir serves men and women of color whom have been indicted and prosecuted by the federal government in the Southeast. Nasir earned his BSW and MSW between 2000 and 2010.

_Rachel._

Rachel currently works as a Social Worker in a family service agency in the Southeastern region of the country. Prior to working in the agency, Rachel completed internships and a field of study for two years in a federal public defense office that served men and women of color. In Rachel’s work at the family service agency, Rachel works closely with families whose members are currently under the jurisdiction of local or state court systems. Rachel earned her BSW and MSW at some point after 2013. Rachel identifies as a Bi-Racial, black and white, woman.

_Simone._

Upon graduating with her BSW in the early 200s, Simone began her work as a Social Worker in the Northwestern region of the country. There, she served men attempting to reintegrate into the community by working with them daily at a pre-release center. Simone earned her MSW within the last 5 years. Simone identifies as a White, cisgender, woman.
Monique.

Monique currently serves as a Social Worker in a community organization aimed at educating previously incarcerated adults through farming and vocational training. At the Southeastern based agency, Monique works primarily with African-American men and boys of color. Monique identifies as a Black woman and earned her MSW after 2014.

Herman.

Herman identifies himself as an African-American male and currently works as a Social Worker and advocate for individuals indicted by or under the jurisdiction of local level court in the Southeast. Herman works almost exclusively with African American men between the ages of 18 and 30 and attempts to mitigate their circumstances to the courts to avoid serving time in a carceral setting. Herman earned his BSW and MSW at some point after 2015.

Carmella.

Carmella serves as a Social Worker in a unit of a federal public defense office. More specifically, Carmella is involved in the advocacy for people currently serving a death penalty sentence and awaiting execution in the Southeastern region of the country. A majority of Carmella’s clients are African-American men and came into the services of her office after aspects of their prosecution, trial, and sentence were found to be unconstitutional and appealed in lower courts. Carmella earned her BSW in 2000 and her MSW before 2010. Carmella identifies as a Caucasian woman but emphasizes that she is “racially conflicted.”
Eliza.

Eliza currently works full-time as a doctoral student in a social work program. On a part-time basis, Eliza continues to fulfill her role as a Social Worker at a local prison reentry program in the Northeastern region of the country. Eliza began this work in 2013 after earning her MSW and works predominately with men of color attempting to reintegrate into an environment that is not as restrictive as prison. Eliza identifies as a White, cisgender, woman.

Table 1.1 - Participants’ Racial Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Racial Group</th>
<th>Number</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bi-Racial</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1.2 - Participants’ BSW and MSW Programs

<table>
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<th>University</th>
<th>BSW</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>University of New Orleans</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Auburn University</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Florida State University</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tulane University</td>
<td></td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Pennsylvania</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of Oregon</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alabama State University</td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University of New England</td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The University of Alabama</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Troy State University</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mars Hill University</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Columbia University</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jackson State University</td>
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</table>
Table 1.3 - *Participants’ BSW Year of Graduation*

<table>
<thead>
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</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>2000</td>
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<td>2017</td>
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Table 1.4 - *Participants’ MSW Year of Graduation*

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</tr>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2018</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Data Collection, Management, and Analysis**

Interviews of participants ended in mid-January 2019. The interviews, because they were conducted through an internet-based video messenger and meeting application known as “Zoom,” presented the opportunity for me to obtain audio and video of the interviews. Once each interview was completed, the interviews were automatically converted to an audio file and listened to for the purpose of transcription. Each interview lasted no less than 40 minutes and no longer than 1 hour and 30 minutes. Each interview was transcribed line-by-line to ensure accuracy in what was said.

Once transcription was complete, data obtained in the semi-structured interviews was coded and analyzed to synthesize perspectives, knowledge, and opinions on racism-based trauma and its place within the carceral experience. The synthetization or
“triangulation” of the data provided by the participants also verifies any competing viewpoints of the participants since they belong to different practice settings (Konecki, 2008). While utilizing the tenants of Critical Race Theory and Racial Development Theory to prompt the study, a grounded theory approach was taken to develop new and abductive themes from the interviews (Charmaz, 2014; Tavory & Timmermans, 2014). Writing throughout the analyzation also occurred to better communicate the stories and opinions of interview participants (Hesse-Biber & Leavy, 2004).

**IRB approval and data security.**

This study was approved by Tulane University’s Institutional Review Board. As such, participants were informed of the study’s goals, procedures, risks, benefits and costs as they related to the study. Participants were informed that even if they consented to participate in the study that they would have the opportunity to withdraw from the study at any point. Participants were also told that the interview would be video and audio recorded. Lastly, participants were told that they would be assigned a pseudonym during the study in the event that their narratives or quotes were used. This was done to protect their confidentiality and anonymity.

**Credibility**

**Achieving saturation.**

In utilizing a qualitative inquiry method such as semi-structured interviews, a possible threat to the research was in its credibility of internal validity regarding saturation. Furthermore, while a set number of interviews were permitted for the study, it was anticipated that fewer interviews may be done if saturation was reached. This anticipation arose after considering the goals of the study and the fact that the
participants, regardless of the number, would and did provide rich narratives because of their expertise and knowledge (Charmaz, 2006; Creswell, 1998; Jette, Grover, & Peck, 2003).

Considering the nature of saturation or ceasing data collection due to there being an overlapping of themes and points made by participants was important. This was doubly important for this study as only the data from 13 participants were analyzed due to access, response, and willingness to participate in the study. The number of participants needed in a qualitative interview is important and debated upon; nevertheless, conducting data analysis early in the data collection process allowed an assessment as to whether or not participants were responding to the questions similarly (Mason, 2010; Morse, 2000). This would not only aid in determining whether additional interviews needed to be conducted but also in whether the sequence of questions needed to be adjusted.

Maintaining sensitivity and consideration to saturation is important. When one chooses to cease or continue data collection is incumbent on the researcher and the ability to view the information provided as redundant can be nuanced (Morse 1995). By utilizing a model of theoretical saturation and inductive thematic saturation during data analysis, the investigator believes that saturation was reached at participant 13. This occurred prior to interviewing the allotted number of participants for the study. During the analysis, theoretical saturation was achieved by developing a set of categories and themes directly related to the tenants of Critical Race Theory and Racial Identity Development Theory (Saunders, et al., 2018).
Because the study is also intended to generate new knowledge regarding a new construct and social work practice technique, the model of inductive thematic saturation was applied to allow new themes to emerge without being wholly restricted by the aforementioned theories (Saunders, et al., 2018). The principal focus for the two models is rooted in how I sampled participants and how analysis was conducted. By utilizing the two models, I sought to solidify an attempt to address saturation by relying on the knowledge and expertise of the participants, thoughtfully analyzing the data, and discussing the data in broad terms with rich examples.

**Utilizing triangulation.**

To gain further credibility for the study, it was important to have my findings validated by approaches and persons other than myself. Engaging in the triangulation approach can oftentimes be costly and threatening to a study as the review of the data by multiple sources reveals that the problem in questions can be or has been treated by old theories, methods, and practices (Denzin, 1978). It was this in mind that the following two triangulation methods were used to contribute to the credibility of the study: investigator triangulation and theoretical triangulation.

By involving the use of another investigator who is knowledgeable of Critical Race Theory, Racial Identity Development, the American justice system, and the social work field, I was able to obtain an additional review of the data and codes that was either in agreement or silent in terms of what was being seen. Because the research inquiry is particularly nuanced in construct and practice, I was hesitant to conduct this form of triangulation. Nevertheless, methodological scholars suggest that the act of having even one other investigator engage with the data is useful for the credibility of the study.
(Campbell & Fiske, 1959; Farmer, Robinson, Elliott, & Eyles, 2006). The second approach, theoretical triangulation, allowed me to validate the data by comparing the participants accounts with the tenants of the aforementioned theories to effectually develop multiple accounts regarding the topic (Denzin, 1978; Tracy, 2010).

**Utilizing member checks.**

An attempt to establish credibility was also made by utilizing the member check process during which participants were asked to review their interview transcripts for accuracy. This approach proved to be meaningful as four participants appreciated the opportunity to reflect on their words and indicated that they planned to utilize what they said as inspiration for more thoughtful practice in the future. While Birt, Scott, Cavers, Campbell, and Walter (2016) suggest that member checking is a cost-effective way to for participants to engage with the study again, I also posit that this additional engagement with the interview and material is positively impactful. It is so because the social work practitioner engages with the material in a manner that mimics a supervisor and supervisee experience and reinforces the tenants of the NASW Code of Ethics regarding a continuous engagement with social work competency. Two of the key issues of member checking to be mindful of were allowing too much time to pass between the time of the interview and the review of the transcripts and participants wanting to engage in a second interview to alter their responses. To combat this, interview transcripts were returned to the participants for review no more than five days after their interview. Interview participants were also encouraged to suggest changes based on the accuracy of their words but to not be concerned with their narratives. The utilization of their voice and
narratives was wanted and encouraged throughout the interview process (Goldblatt, Karnieli-Miller, & Neumann, 2011; Varpio, Ajjawi, Monrouxe, O’Brien, & Rees, 2017).
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

Overview of Results

Interviews with the participants yielded 13 transcripts from 13 participants working in various justice-system settings across the country. The results of the chapter are presented in three overarching categories that are as follows: Conceptualizing Racism-Trauma, The Extent of Interventional Engagement with Racism-Based Trauma, and Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Engagement with the construct. Each section includes themes that are categorized in subthemes, followed by a conclusion that summarizes the overall significance of the findings. The goals for the study were as follows: To identify how justice system social workers define racism-based trauma; to understand whether or not justice system social workers consider the carceral experience to be racially traumatic; to inform practice approaches to racism-based trauma among justice system social workers.

Section I describes how social workers conceptualize racism-based trauma. Participants were asked to describe their perceptions and practice experience regarding the incarceration experience of their clients. Participants were also asked to define racism-based trauma. During their definitions a third subtheme of dichotomization as it relates to race and the construct emerged. The theme will be discussed in this section. Section II describes how the third goal of the study in informing practice approaches to racism-based trauma among justice system social workers. The extent to which social workers engaged with the construct was explored to establish a baseline for future research and to inform practice approaches. Actions involving engagement make up the set of themes in this section. Maintaining the notion that the engagement with the
construct is an interpersonal and intrapersonal experience, Section III provides themes related to challenges and difficulties in engaging with the construct. Comfortability related racial-identity development will also be discussed in a subtheme.

Section I: Conceptualizing Racism-Based Trauma

In addressing the multifaceted and self-reflective nature of conceptualizing Racism-Based Trauma, I highlight three critical themes that emerged from the interviews regarding thoughts of the construct and its occurrence in the incarceration experience: (a) the incarceration experience being highly racialized and traumatic, (b) the difficulty and dynamics in defining racism-based trauma, (c) and the dichotomization of the construct. These findings aid in answering the first two of the aforementioned research questions: How do justice system social workers define racism-based trauma? Do justice system social workers consider the incarceration experience to be one where racism-based stress occurs?

A Racialized and Traumatic Incarceration Experience

During the beginning of the interview, participants were asked to give insight into what their clients experienced as a part of being involved in the justice system. The concepts of racism-based trauma or the general concept of trauma were not mentioned to avoid leading participants in any way. Prior to this set of questions, participants were asked whether or not they considered themselves to be advocates of those involved in the justice system and to give some detail regarding whether or not they worked with visibly different racial groups. For the social worker, oftentimes perceiving the experiences of clients aids in responding and advocating more effectively. The description of clientele
also began the discussion of thinking about the experiences of people of color. It was disclosed by all participants that a majority of their clients were men of color.

**Declaring the entire justice system as racist.**

Participants were candid in their description of an American justice system and of an incarceration experience that involved a number of racial disparities. This subtheme of declaring the entire justice system as racist emerged. Some of the participants simply declared that the entire system was racist, perpetuated racism at every stage, and as one not truly doing what many believe it is intended to do. Eliza shared, “I think within the criminal justice system, where it is so clearly raced and racist in, you know, every step of the way. It doesn’t serve anybody. Um, I read a while ago that it’s like post slavery.” Eliza’s comments regarding a racialized and racism filled criminal justice system were also echoed by Simone who stated the following:

Simone: Um, yeah, I don't know. I yeah, I don't know. I think that, um, yeah, I don't, I don't know that. I there's like so many things to say about race and racism in the criminal justice system. But it's like, sure. Yeah. What else do you say? Really? Yeah, it's just like, so obviously a problem.

In most instances, the justice system as a whole being one that perpetuated discrimination on the basis of race was brought up by participants. Even after simply bringing up the racialized experience of clients, a feeling of disbelief as to how the system is the way that it is arose amongst the participants. This was spoken on candidly by Harriet when discussing the experience of her clients:

Harriet: It shouldn't go hand in hand. Race should not matter in the justice system. Yeah. You know and maybe this is a naive way of me thinking about it, but it should not matter what your race is in the justice system. The justice system is supposed to be about these laws, these are the laws that we have to follow. And if you don't follow those laws, and this is the punishment for, you know, breaking that law. It shouldn't be a factor what your race is and as to how you're treated when you violate those laws.
Experiencing racism by the police.

Before delving into the constructs of trauma or racism-based trauma, participants were aware of and spoke on specific experiences of racially traumatic incidents reported by their clients. A subtheme of experiencing racism by the police emerged. These experiences were prevalent in their client’s interaction with the police. Herman and Monique stated the following when asked what, if anything, clients have disclosed to them about their experiences:

Herman: Especially with the clients in the justice system. They, they see that a lot and one thing is with cops. They get racial profiled really easily. I had one of them tell me today that they were just walking down the street and a cop came up to him asking them, "Where you stay and where you from?" Um, trying to figure out what they were doing and what they (the police) can go pick them up from. It really bothered them because they weren't doing nothing.

Monique: Okay, a lot, a lot of, um, I would say, I can think of times that clients have talked to me about what it feels like to be targeted by police, because they're black and their relationship to the police in their community. And wanting to leave this community, wanting to leave the community because of police and because police are targeting them because they are black.

In Monique and Herman’s recollection of what client’s disclosed to them regarding their interactions with police, there was an allusion to experiences based on race that were both pervasive and difficult to escape. In both of their recollections, clients experienced the racial harassment aspect of racism to the extent of wanting to leave their community and being very bothered by the experience. In some instances, the pervasiveness of being stopped and harassed by police on the basis of simply appearing to be a person of color was so egregious that cases were dismissed. Mia says that, “a lot of the cases that we work, happen to be dismissed off of unjustifiable stops. And a lot of times those stops are because of profiling or you know, persons being racially profiled.” Both, the participants
and the clients were affected negatively by simply reflecting on and understanding the role and impact of the police. For some clients, they often depended on police to do their jobs effectively and truthfully but suffered when this was not the case. Angela said the following regarding one of her client’s:

Angela: His friend took off running to try to get the cops to chase him instead of another guy that my client and his friend were with. The friend and the other guy get away. So, my client gets wrongfully arrested and never had any sort of like “legal closure” regarding the incident.

In telling the story, Angela was visibly sad for her client and alluded to the impact that police have on the community. Angela also alluded to how critical the role of police officers was as they are highly powered and highly visible professionals. Much like Angela’s telling of the story and of her client’s reaction, there was also a recognition by participants and their clients that police officers perpetuate improprieties and do it openly. Nasir stated the following:

Nasir: People often think that the police and law enforcement are honest and true and fresh. And for the most part, most of them are but a lot of the cases that we'll find, police feel like they are often unprepared or "undergunned." So, they begin to cut corners, or they do things that that are unethical to get this person off the street or to get that result that they want. So, it's not above them to lie about facts. It's no above them to plant things. It's not above them to go outside of procedure and do illegal stops. But it's hard to get judges and jurors to believe that the police are not always honest.

The participants spoke about the discriminatory and racist encounters with police as being something that happened regularly. Eliza concluded the racism perpetuated by the police on people of color by stating the following:

Eliza: They’re (police) are going to say, “that's a nice looking white lady.” I'm not going to get stopped for jaywalking in front of a cop but that is not the case for the majority of black and brown people that I know, you know? You know, that is just exacerbated when we're talking about people who live in poor communities of color that are over policed already. And so, you know, we're punishing people for, for, for police decision making that is at its core racist, you know? Like, historically and currently racist.
The anecdotes and experiences detailed by the participants regarding the police were insightful and important to the legitimization of the racism-based trauma construct. As mentioned earlier, one of the key components in legitimizing the construct is that the trauma, stress, and injury is prompted by an external event. While the notion of pervasive and unjust policing is not new, this does begin to concretize the notion that being arrested in traumatic. This also extends the tenants of Critical Race Theory and the notion that laws, and systems are in place to allow actions that are overtly and racially oppressive.

**Disparaging clinical treatment experience.**

A subtheme emerged suggesting that addiction and mental health was not being treated and acknowledged fairly amongst all clients. Eliza says that she has “just seen the ways that it is not. Like, addiction is not treated equally among all races in the system.” When asked if there were any disparities noticed in her work, Rachel said that the “majority of them (clients) were black and that they had mental health issues. They had things going on that affected them in their past with their families and things of that nature.” From the responses, police officers were not the only justice system actors perpetuating racism. This emerging theme was important in identifying other settings during which racism-based injuries may occur and whom could be a perpetrator. The subtheme also alludes to how other professionals are untrained on how to be racially considerate and sensitive to those involved in the justice system. In Nasir’s narrative, there is an assumption and acceptance that the person of color is more likely to malinger an illness or hardship. Nasir spoke more on this in detail:

Nasir: I've got a client right now that sitting in jail, and all the guards was saying that he was, he was faking, he was acting. I spoke to his family after I left the jail talking to him, because what he said sounds so real. This boy has been a paranoid schizophrenic since he was 15 years old. He's 30 years old, in jail. The guards
are beating on him saying he's talking too much and that he's threatening them. He's saying things you know, out of order. I had to go back and tell them, “Look, this guy is mentally ill. You know, he's not talking 12 hours, you know, or talking all day long. He has a mental illness.” It was hard for them to believe that, you know. I also had to pay to have him evaluated. Our office did. And they were like, "This, he needs his medicine." Once he got his medicine, his whole demeanor changed. But the judge thought he was just a smart aleck. So, he was getting beat. He was getting beat on by inmates. He was getting beat on by guards. Not recognizing mental health. Because he didn't look like he had a mental health. How does a person look mentally ill? They look just you and I.

**Navigating an unforgivable and broken system.**

Participants were consistent on their clients and how they navigated a system that was especially broken and unforgiving. When continuing the conversation around what she felt as though her clients experienced, Rachel said “I do not like the justice system as it is. I think that it is broken. I think that there are a lot of people who are in prison that don't necessarily need to be there.” I felt as though these ponderings were interesting and prompted some reflection for the participants. What was once again mentioned was the difficulty of living in and being engulfed in the American justice system. Just simply navigating the experience proves to be difficult and accentuates that the system is one not meant to be an easily maneuvered system. In maintaining the tenants of Critical Race Theory regarding interest convergence, the system being easily navigable severely undermines servitude and maintaining capital interests. I also felt as though the long and thoughtful reflections from the participants highlighted how difficult the experience must be for those actually incarcerated. The narratives once again emphasized how especially stressful the incarceration experience was for clients. Participants also took time thinking about how to target their advocacy approaches and what qualified them as advocates in the broken system. Eliza began this subtheme by saying that it was her “duty to support
and raise the voices of people who are marginalized and trapped within the various components of the criminal justice system.” Considering the seriousness of one’s advocative role for those trapped in a broken and system that was hard to navigate also arose in Mia’s decision to be completely honest with her clients. She revealed that she tells them the following:

Mia: This is something that I always say to my clients, “When you are in the system, you have zero control over anything. You have no control. None. You have no control in this jail, you have no control over what’s going to happen. You have no control over the sentence, you have no control whatsoever.

In discussing the difficulty in navigating a broken system, participants provided more clarity on what additional aspects of the system are broken. Having to do with justice system actors, Rose suggested that the system remains broken because of the judges in the system “being political pawns and not having incentive to evolve.” Rose went on to say the following:

Rose: They just live in bubble in terms of what touches them from our social dynamics. Like, poverty will never touch them. Capitalism has built walls around them. From their fancy cars, to their gated communities, or through their assistance – even the architecture of the fucking courtroom keeps them separate all of the time from the people they sit and judge. It is very rare to find a judge to help pierce that divide.

In her narrative, Rose reinforces the notion of liberalism by critiquing this “hands off” and blind approach taken by powerful judges in the courtroom. Even if done unintentionally, Rose’s description of federal judges describes a setting that either nurtures blind justice or willful ignorance. Rose’s notion of liberalism and “living in a bubble” also allows some of the harmful racial identities and functions to thrive without going unchecked. The danger in participating in liberalism or being silent may communicate that structures and practices are fine as is. This also allows some covert
racism to remain at play. Carmella speaks of this when discussing the power that some juries have had when sentencing her clients to death:

Carmella: So in the course of our work, we try to speak with all of the people who actually sat on the jury and convicted the client our clients and then voted on either life or death right in the sentencing phase. So, because of how I think our system is - you know, it's just systemic racism - most of my clients are black but most of the jury members are white.

In these ponderings on the incarceration experience and how difficult it is to navigate, there was an allusion to this simply being the norm for clients and for justice system actors. Participants seemed to come to accept the fact that system was inherently punitive towards their clients. Herman stated that “it’s mainly African-Americans in the system.” It was in his opinion that “they try to hold it against them and prevent them from trying to rehabilitate themselves. They don’t want to let you go.” Herman, much like the other participants, continued the suggestion of the “they” and how interests had to be maintained by a larger system. I found this constant reference to the system as “they” to be revealing. It was throughout these questions that the participants presented some uncertainty as to who made up and reinforced this larger, oppressive justice system. The reference to the system being un navigable hints at the presence of a master controlling a system. Identifying exactly who the master is proves to be difficult for the practitioner. There is an omnipresence of someone or something being in control and dictating oppressive practices. Maintaining the social work practice approach of being goal oriented for and on behalf of clients, one strategy was mentioned to be used to navigate the system. The strategy, as mentioned by Angela, is nothing more than operating from a place of acceptance and desperation:
Angela: So when I think about how my clients navigate these spaces and the carceral state, I think many of my clients have internalized like, "Yo, I gotta, I gotta do what I gotta do to survive and I'm going to go out knowing how to make money because we're all impacted by capitalism. I'm going to go out and make money. These major companies are making a killing and getting rich." Pharmaceutical companies are getting rich. People are you know, being fed via social media, whatever, like go out and get yours and be an entrepreneur. So many of my clients - I think my drug offense clients for example - have internalized in some sense that like, "Yo, I'm just trying to get the bread that's already out there and I'm doing what I have to do." And some of it is transgenerational, you know? "My pops did this. My grandpa did this. My uncle's, my aunts, blah, blah, blah." Some of my clients I think operate from a place of desperation.

The notion that the incarceration experience and the justice system was broken and difficult to navigate provided some insight into the next set of questions. It was important to understand how participants viewed the incarceration experience and the theme of being unable to navigate the system was insightful. Participants often spoke of specific racial experiences in different phases of the experience without being prompted. Themes regarding how specific phases of the incarceration experience were traumatic and racially traumatic emerged. Nasir seemed to speak on what phases were particularly hard to navigate, when the difficulty began, and who fueled an unnavigable system. Nasir also echoed Angela’s notion of there really being no easy answer as to how to navigate an unforgiving and broken system. Nasir says that most of his clients are “defeated from the point that they come into contact with police. Before they make it to court there is strict intimidation and ignorance.” With a system focused on blindness coupled with a lack of optimism and engagement on behalf of those incarcerated, these findings reinforced the notion that a lot of the onus in advocating in and out of the intervention setting would be placed on the social worker.
Experiencing stress prior to incarceration.

Participants were asked to describe what they felt as though clients experienced before coming into contact with their agency and what they felt clients experienced after leaving their agency. During this section of questions, subthemes emerged that focused on stressful experiences of the client before incarceration, during incarceration, and after incarceration. These findings strengthen the aforementioned notion that the incarceration extends well beyond one being sentenced and serving time in detention. Regarding the participant’s thoughts on stressful experiences before being sentenced, there was a notion that this was to be expected given one’s life circumstances. Eliza, Mia, and Angela stated that their clients of color experienced stress the minute that they were born. The three were asked about the challenges that they have seen before and after a client is on their caseload. Speaking in euphemisms of life being a card game, the circumstances or cards were arranged for their clients before the game even began to be played. What Eliza, Mia, and Angela said is as follows:

Eliza: So, you know, we're, we're not talking about people who, overwhelmingly, have been given every opportunity and, you know, given every support, and then suddenly, you know, things take a turn. We're talking about people who have had the deck stacked against them time and time again.

Mia: Um, some of the biggest challenges that I have, I would have to say, um trying to not even persuade, almost persuade, but trying to get a judge to understand that every client isn’t the same. The charge may be the same but every just every client doesn't have the same story. And some stories may lead to everyone isn’t dealt the same cards, although they may end up in the same place.

Angela: I think for our clients, it shifts having to shoulder all the blame of like, I just made bad choices to like, "Yo, hold up, I started a 52-card game with like, 37 cards. And I was expected to play the game fairly. And I was expected to follow the rules. But I only got like, half the freakin deck. Like I'm gonna do what I gotta do to win this card game.
What was equally revealing about this aspect of life before completing a sentence was the overwhelming feeling of being disregarded by those assumed to be an advocate. Many participants directly stated or mentioned that the legal team that they were a part of was not as helpful as they should have been. This notion once again alluded to the traumatic incarceration experience being perpetuated by justice system actors. The narratives regarding the legal team and attorneys in particular was the beginning of intrapersonal engagement with those believed to be racial and professional advocates. Participants seemed to be reflexive and candid about their legal colleagues. This subtheme suggests how important the role of the social worker is in the multidisciplinary, legal team approach. Oftentimes, the client experiences apprehension in working with those assigned to help. This is not at the fault of the client. Mia attempts to understand what she can do for her clients because “most of them, unfortunately, don't have very good things to say about the team that worked for them in the past.”

This notion in taking this approach was also mentioned by Harriet as her clients have had negative experiences with legal teams and attorneys at various justice system levels. She said that “a lot of the clients that I deal with, have been involved with the court system for quite a while on many different levels for many different things. By the time I get them, there is a huge distrust for free lawyers.” Without being prompted, participants began to fill in the gaps in understanding why clients may be distrustful of the legal team and attorneys in particular. In Carmella’s work, she often takes time to explain happenings to the clients in a more understandable and sensitive manner. Her clients are often frustrated as “the attorneys in our office who are representing them are
legal minded and go at things in a legal realm. I advocate for our clients and explain things to the attorneys who then can better represent them.”

Participants seemed to serve as a mediator during a stressful process of not being able to understand what was going on with their case. This is understandable as attorneys make decisions on behalf of the client that oftentimes have direct and immediate impacts on freedom and wellness. There was an understanding of the importance of serving the attorney and by proxy, serve the client. What is interesting in this subtheme is that while client’s experience angst as a result of distrusting the legal team, the participants experienced the same. Participants placed an emphasis on ensuring that the clients knew what was being done in their case. Participants also experienced what clients experienced when an attorney stated or did something inconsiderate. Rose makes this point clearer by stating the following:

Rose: Another thing that I do is alternative to incarceration plans. Um, so, no matter if our clients are facing a mandatory minimum or whatever, I’ll make a plan with them about if they were to get out, what would be their system of support. Then I write it up. I have learned to that with some attorneys. I did this whole thing with a colleague’s client and she didn’t even use it. She didn’t tell me what she was filing. She didn’t tell me that she wasn’t going to use. She didn’t give me feedback on it. I was just like, “Why the fuck would I spend more time on this you know?

As will be discussed in a subsequent section, harm by racism can still occur by those whom claim to have the best interests of clients in mind. From the narratives provided, sensitivity to race and racial history as it relates to the justice system should not only be reserved for the social worker. Not only was it reported that clients appeared to be untrustworthy of the legal team and attorney, participants felt the same. Participants also recognized how impactful the moments before incarceration or receiving a long prison sentence were. This is why participants chose to begin their advocacy work with
clients the moment that they came into contact with them. Without formally considering the incarceration experience as phasic or one that is particularly traumatic, the work done by the participants strengthened the two constructs. Rachel mentioned that from the moment of “being indicted, my clients are distrustful of attorneys.”

Clients are assumingly scared and upset. Rachel went on to mention that she “as a social worker, being able to come in and get their story so that we can provide the best service for them and try to make appropriate recommendations for them,” mitigated some of that distrust. Nasir was an additional participant who reinforced the notion that the experience prior to incarceration is highly stressful and prompted by the legal team, in part. Nasir felt that “there's going to be a mistrust for the criminal justice system, even for a public defender. “I'm being represented for free by somebody that the state gave me.”

They're thinking that you are out to catch me up to get me incarcerated.” In the aforementioned narratives, there is a critique of a system that nurtures punishment and unfairness before a person is even found guilty or pleads guilty. There is an innate awareness that the system is racialized and unfair.

In this theme and throughout the themes regarding the phases of incarceration, it became clear that justice system social workers were capable of applying the critical theory lens regarding race in their practice. The critiques and reflections put forth by the participants suggests that the incarceration experience is stressful in ways not imagined or that “that there are few things that are as stressful,” as suggested by Eliza. The participants contextualize and paint a picture of an experience only assumed to be experienced in succession. The narratives constantly serve as a critique of a system that is unfair and indicate that personal reflections contextualize to this particular field of social
work. The narratives, like Angela’s, also specifically consider the incarceration experience to be one that is traumatic. Angela said the following:

Angela: Okay. You know, I think I think you go into a place that like mentally is made to break you down. Prison is, I do believe, prison is made to help you conform, to help you bend the knee, help you learn how to accept authority and everything. I think the process of a pretrial investigation and the hopelessness that you experience when they say, "Look, these are your guidelines" and you're just like, "Oh my God, when am I coming home." I think that process is traumatic. Let me back up, even from the moment of arrest. The Feds don't do the notice in the mail. They bust in your house at six in the morning. They snatch you out in front of your kids. If, if you're fortuitous enough for them to meet you in the streets so you're not around your family then perhaps that's one less humiliation but oftentimes they're coming into your place the smashing the place. Now, your family has to deal with the humiliation from the neighbors being like "Yo, what's going on?" That's traumatic. Your family may not know what you were up to or the full extent of what you're up to. If you were busted and carrying a weapon and the NYPD picks you up, and you think that you’re going to get a citation and go home and get a court date, they now say “Nah, nah boy we shifted you to the feds. It frazzles your world, right?

Before moving forward and maintaining a focus on how race prompts trauma in the incarceration setting, I want to include two additional subthemes that I feel are relevant to the findings and the larger discussion. In assessing the racial experiences of those in the justice system, participants alluded to the fact that African-Americans were not the only people of color experiencing stress in the justice system. While this was assumed, I felt as though this was critical for the study for participants to acknowledge it on their own. It also alluded to a more developed racial identity and the fact that one should be particularly mindful of clients of color. Rose and Simone stated the following:

Rose: Right now, with illegal reentry cases, they just, I don’t know, we haven’t even had a training on how to handle the cases. Like, I don’t speak Spanish so there’s that language barrier. Everybody gets deported pretty much no matter what, so we’re not preserving issues. I’ve been here for four and a half years and I have not gone to bat for one immigration successfully. I did one sentencing project on a lady who walked all the way from somewhere in Mexico, through Texas, to somewhere in Louisiana. Like, I drew a map showing how far she had to go to be with her kid. She had picture of her feet and how they had split open.
Simone: Um, specifically, in my case management job at the prerelease center in Montana, which is a predominantly white state, there were mostly people identifying as White and then the second largest population was Native American folks. Um, which was a disparate. I would, I don't actually have any, like, research on this to quote, but my experience was that there was a disproportionate number of Native Americans in our facility, then the population of the state was reflected.

One additional subtheme that emerged that is worth mentioning is the opinion of time and how it is experienced differently by the incarcerated person. In discussing the experiences of waiting for trial and prior to being sentenced, Eliza and Mia spoke on how the incessant waiting experienced by their clients was particularly stressful. This occurrence also hints at the need to be critical of a justice system and consider the traumatic effects. The following narratives from Eliza and Mia suggest that waiting forced upon by the system before incarceration undermines the right to a speedy due process, continued disregard by a system, and that serving prison time unofficially begins before it possibly should:

Eliza: So I know, I know what that space looks like. I know what that process looks like. I've seen people go through it. Um, I mean, a lot of it is just waiting, I think, you know, I think it's a question of people's time, just being completely like, I don't know, not valued as just like, a much gentler way to put it than I would like to.

Mia: And a lot of times they're sitting, and they want to talk to their attorneys, they want to know what's going on the cases don't move fast. A lot of times they're in limbo waiting to see or it says the cases being put off an put off and put off so yes, I think that is emotionally, mentally, physically. Um, I think it's, it's very stressful.

The next section focuses on the theme of experiencing stress during the lengthy incarceration setting.
Experiencing stress during incarceration.

In sharing what was perceived to occur before and after a client comes into contact with the agency, participants still gave thoughts on what serving an actual prison sentence was like for the client. Themes that emerged are as follows: Surviving the experience, being “othered,” and blaming oneself. A theme of noticing racial disparities during the sentencing of a client also emerged. Each of the themes suggested the stress experienced by clients. I also became aware of how critical it was to not suggest trauma or any forms of trauma to the participants. Participants, in speaking of the client experiences, were speaking on trauma on their own and further legitimizing my notion that the incarceration experience is traumatic as a whole and in parts.

Eliza, Simone, and Rose discussed candidly what they felt clients whom experienced incarceration did in order to survive. Eliza, Simone, Rose, and other participants already acknowledged that the justice system was broken and able to maintain some sort of dominion over the body. In that acknowledgement the notion of shifting one’s thought process and strengthening mental resiliency as necessary to survive the experience became apparent. This shifting occurred so much so that Eliza felt as though “the average person would not be able to survive prison, probation, or parole. They just wouldn’t.” Eliza’s notion that some people were able to survive the prison experience better than others was sobering. The notion also once again alludes to a justice system established to oppress and exert hard circumstances for some while more mitigating circumstances for others. This may be seen more clearly in the next section which details disparities in sentencings on the basis of race and physical appearance.
The claims by these participants also hint at this notion of interest convergence offered by Critical Race Theory. Because maintaining one’s capital interests through indentured servitude of people of color is so pivotal, it is important to reinforce an idea being comfortable with being a servant. This reinforcement of being comfortable or adapting to surviving a prison experience and carrying it even after prison was spoken on by Simone:

Simone: Yeah, um, I think, you know, I think everyone I worked with was really what I would call a survivor really built on adapting to their circumstances and whatever situation they were in and trying to get through. And oftentimes, their criminal history was completely reflective of that, right, that they were, their life was built as such, and they’ve been dealt circumstances as such that, like what they were doing to survive was deemed criminal, Even though it had also kept them alive, which is, you know, what we're all trying to do.

These remarks also further the notion that the prison system is intrinsically punitive and not rehabilitative. The response of adapting and accepting unfair treatment is outside of the scope of punishment. I even posit that serving a prison experience is just as much of a mental commitment as it is a physical commitment. As Rose spoke on in the following excerpt, many of the clients within the justice system social work setting are suffering in and being punished by an omnipresent system:

Rose: Yeah, there are people who know how to do time and people who would and do commit suicide instead of going to jail. We had this one guy who was the best drug dealer in his neighborhood. If he was from any other neighborhood or family and had been sent to school in a legitimate way, he would have been a CEO. He can run numbers and people and is just a great manager. He got busted. He dealt to somebody, who dealt to somebody, who dealt to somebody who OD’d. He was charged with distribution resulting in death and faced life. Um, and, he had done state time before at like one or two years at a time. His parents were both pastors in the East. He was prepared and was like, “This comes along with the life.” He was like, “I honestly wish that I would’ve dealt with the kid because if he had done that in front of me, I would have saved his life. I carry Narcan. If I didn’t have Narcan on me, I would have just injected salt water into his veins. Do you know how many people have been saved on the streets just
giving them salt water? Like, that dude wouldn’t have died if I was around. I’m that good.” Anyway, he got an insane amount of years. He was not vulnerable and didn’t present as vulnerable. My best guess is that there were a dynamic amount of reasons as to why he was prepared but one that sticks out is because the police had been on his ass since he was able to ride a bike.

The stress experienced during incarceration also appears to come from being dehumanized or “othered.” Simone said that her advocacy approach focused on “the way that we completely dehumanize people in the criminal justice system.” The occurrence of clients either reporting or being observed as being treated as less than human was constant. For the practitioner, this also seemed to be overwhelming. Monique alluded to being overwhelmed and what she struggled with in the narrative below:

Monique: So I think my biggest struggle is the kind of like dehumanization that happens when you're trying to help people because the volume of people is so great that like, I hope that this makes sense. But the volume of people that you're trying to serve is so great that I think that sometimes people are dehumanized; otherwise, it would be too much to deal with every single person as like a human being.

While Monique and Simone disclosed how overwhelming their experiences were as it related to their advocacy, it remained clear that the two were focused on critiquing a system. Monique and Simone also actualized the notion that this justice system perpetuates stress and hardship on the practitioner. Critical Race Theory posits that the system of oppression is upheld by subjugating persons of color through laws and other covert and overt practices. At this point in the analysis I realized that practitioners were affected by this justice system in some way. Participants were also experiencing stress and “otherness” as a result of working in an oppressive system. Because the interviews were video recorded, I was able to capture the physical reactions of interviewees. This experience of stress of feeling othered was visceral and came about during Nasir’s narrative of the dehumanization experienced by his clients. It is as follows:
Nasir: When the police come in and the first thing you do is, they stop you and put their hands on you or they call you out of your name. You know whether it's "Nigga," whether it's "Boy" or whether it's some type of cuss word. It’s anything other than "young man" or "sir!"

The idea of being othered or dehumanized contributed to a point that will be discussed throughout the study. This is an idea of “vicarious racism-based trauma.” Nasir, having not yet identified as an African-American man, became emotional and upset simply by describing what he felt as though clients experienced during the incarceration process.

Witnessing and reflecting on being a victim of racism as a result of being “other” was a strong focal point during this theme. Participants, including Meghan and Carmella round out the notion of “otherness” and dehumanization in their narratives as follows:

Meghan: There’s this one client I’m thinking of. His mom is a single mother, I think, like six other kids. And he's been in the criminal justice system since he was in like, second grade. I don't really remember what we were talking about or what I asked him that led to this but in session, he started crying and was saying, like, his whole life he's been viewed as criminal, and had a very hard time with the fact that he feels like the state never viewed him as anything but that.”

Carmella: So, it's, you know, it'll be a lot of giving descriptions of, you know, just being called "thug", you know, the being called the “N-word”, that kind of stuff.

Stress during the incarceration experience also arose because clients blame themselves for their incarceration. Rose equated the stressful feeling to that of Stockholm Syndrome in the following narrative:

Rose: It’s like Stockholm Syndrome, I feel like. Because you’ve seen it where you get clients in front of judges and they give them a lesson and the clients are like,” I’m so sorry judge, you’re right and I’ll never do it again.” And they sit down and they’re really hard on themselves. And it’s like, “Why are you playing into this guy.” Like, I know that you’re “supposed to” but you’re really hard on yourself and you have a choice.
This theme of blaming oneself removes the ability to accept responsibility for actions, while also being able to critique an unfair and unjust system. Being unable to critique also means that rules remain unchecked. For Simone, these rules in her reintegration center were unfair, oppressive, and due for change:

Simone: A lot of rules the rules in the center and a lot of the programming is “guilt inducing programming.” Like the treatment centers were really based on, like, you have caused harm with your addiction, so you need to stop engaging with it.

I also find that critique, when done effectively, is powerful. In blaming oneself and not critiquing the faults of a system, those in power remain in power. This became evident in Meghan’s recollection of conversations with clients and how police operated:

Meghan: It was interesting, because he (the client) also would say, like, he did do things that he shouldn't have been doing. It was never, they always got lucky. It was never “the cop had proof.”

These persons in the justice system and incarceration experience remain unquestioned and free from accountability. Clients of the participants seemed to take responsibility. While this is appropriate to some extent, the traumatic aspect of this is that one assumes responsibility and blames oneself for happenings well beyond their scope of responsibility. I posit that this is a heavy burden to bear and attributes to the stress experienced during the incarceration experience.

Noticing racial disparities in sentencings.

Participants spoke at length about specifically noticing racial disparities in sentencings. This theme emerged when participants reflected on what clients experienced during and after their time together. Participants were also asked to reflect on any noticed disparities. I found that in this theme there was a reiteration of being unable to critique the justice system without thinking about the racial disparities that are present. I also
noticed that to some extent, participants were able to discuss the racialized experience before engaging with ideas of racial identity development.

Participants began to address the notion of sentencing disparities by first acknowledging that the amount of time one was sentenced to detention was exorbitant and an issue needed to be addressed. Rachel, in discussing the sentencing of one of her clients, said that the “issue needed to be addressed” after discussing a client who was being sentenced to 15 years in prison as a habitual offender after only being found guilty of one other offense. Mia’s noticing of racial disparities provided a bit more context into the issue of disparate sentencings based on race and other demographic influences. Her narrative is as follows:

Mia: I remember this one case in (redacted). I remember a lot of people talking about a judge who gave some white boys - there were some preppy white boys who had been dealing drugs and I don't know if they were if they were actually drug addicts. But I know that they were dealing drugs and they were in school. I want to say they were they were maybe went to a local university, or something like that. And, um, I think the judge actually said on record that they didn't come from the hood, or they didn't come from the ghetto. And he knew that this was, you know, not the behavior that they were raised with. And he's going to give them a chance. And there must not have been a mandatory minimum. But they did no time. They got probation. This was something that was almost unheard of. I don't think it could have been a large amount because there was no mandatory minimum, but they got no time whatsoever, zero time at all. And if the clients had have looked different, had zero priors, no criminal history whatsoever, but lived in the projects off Martin Luther King Drive or had a mom who was on welfare, and no preppy look, there's no way that he would have given those individuals probation.

This emerging theme also provided some early insight into how participants conceptualized race. There was the notion that a stressful sentencing experience was prompted by race. Nevertheless, it is important to provide the narratives of Rose and Nasir into this section. The two spoke on the impact of color and class on sentencing disparities. It was evident that the two viewed the idea of color or physical appearance
and race as the same construct. What was more telling was the more simple notion that the more a client appeared to look like a judge, the more lenient the judge would be. For context, the judges in the working environments of Rose and Nasir appeared to be White. Their narratives are as follows:

Rose: I can think when we just went to war over a sentencing. I was telling this story last night. We had a young girl who was 22 in a bank robbery conspiracy. She worked inside of a bank, helped inform the robbers when the bank would have the most money, when to come, and how to do it. She pretended to not know about it. She lied to the FBI when they questioned her and eventually had a come to Jesus moment. She was a young black, light skinned, girl. We got her probation. I have never seen that. I just don’t know.

Rose was asked to provide some more insight into why her client being “light skinned” was important to mention. Rose was also asked if she felt as though her client being “light skinned” had anything to do with her lenient sentence. Rose’s response is as follows:

Rose: So, she presents as black. Like, her mom is a light Creole like one of these women looking racially ambiguous. Her original dad was African. Her stepdad was black, and I don’t know what he presented as. Her current step dad is light skinned, Creole and Black. And so, she, I’m just now learning about this as a white woman from here but like, the classism that exists within race structure and this area in particular. That being said, she was of the privileged, light skinned, wealthy community. Anyway, she got probation and I have never seen that happen.

Nasir: You know, coming into a courtroom and the judge can look at two people with the same crime but different races and view it differently. The US attorney or the State Attorney's office would take two people with the same crime and based on how they look, or what their skin color, dress, family name, area code, and they will be charged differently. They will be treated and sentenced differently.

I chose to include this as a theme in the findings to add to the notion that trauma and racism-based trauma is occurring in the incarceration experience. As was mentioned earlier, racism-based trauma is specific in that the trauma is prompted by an external
source. The source could be an event or a person. The noticed disparities as they relate to
sentencings serves as a prime example of an event that prompts physical and emotional
responses to an event. This event is also one that greatly affects people of color and is
critiqued by those with a sensitivity to race. The racial identity development of the
participants had yet to be explored during this section of the interview. Nevertheless, I
posit that the ability to notice racial disparities in sentencings of clients is something that
the social work practitioner does innately. I also suggest that the ability to notice and
critique racial disparities is done when one is aware of racial experiences. If one is even
the slightest bit aware of racial disparities in the criminal justice system, one
automatically engages with the tenants of Critical Race Theory.

**Experiencing stress after incarceration.**

Participants revealed that stress experienced after the incarceration experience
also occurred. In their descriptions, the stress occurred mostly in how their clients were
disregarded by court officials and in their inability to gain employment. Once again,
clients seemed to be subjected to stress and mistreatment by officials. In the post
incarceration experience, the actors or officials being critiqued were probation officers.
The narratives provided by the participants also suggest that a lack of action may also
prompt stress. Meghan stated that “typically my clients don’t talk to their probation
officer.” Simone reiterated the disregard by the probation officers by stating that she had
witnessed probation officers “who were not very interested in getting to know the client
as a person and just needed them to show up to appointments.” This lack of engagement
on behalf of the probation took a toll on the wellness of clients. Harriet spoke to this in
following narrative:
Harriet: I mean, I've had several clients to say, "I'd rather go back to prison than to deal with being on probation." My response to that is, "Well, number one, you no one should ever want to go to back to prison. Number two, the thing about being on supervision is that there is nothing you can do about it other than finish.

Based on the participants descriptions, many clients experience stress simply by not knowing what to do while on probation. Clients are seeking guidance and are susceptible to stress and recidivating a likely and expected outcome. Monique speaks more on this:

Monique: Like, sometimes there would be a lag of like, okay, you're out, you're on probation. But your probation officer still hasn't come to your house to tell you what you can and can't do. So, you do something you didn't know you weren't supposed to and didn't know that counted. Like, you know, there's sometimes just a lag and a disconnect between all these different stages of like, you know, they get on probation, or they get released. And like, there's a lag of support services coming in.

That lag of support services perpetuates stressors related to gaining and maintaining employment. The inability to obtain and maintain employment among reintegrating citizens is not a new occurrence (Solinas-Saunders & Stacer, 2015).

Participants reiterating this notion does indicate that both participants and their clients are still aware and affected by this occurrence. Participants, without being prompted were also mindful of the impact of race and the difficulty in obtaining employment. This awareness is critical to the larger exploration into considering the traumatic effects of racism in a justice system practice setting. For Eliza, considering this experience as it relates to policies gives more credence to this point:

Eliza: White men with a felony record are hired more frequently than black men without, right? I mean, so even in a city like mine, where, you know, we have "Ban the Box." You know, you're no longer able to ask people about a felony record, you know, when you're applying to jobs, which is great. It's also not fixing the problem because, you know, we're going back to this discussion of how our employers what, what assumptions are employers making? In thinking about this post-incarceration experience, participants consider the notion of how clients whom have served time in prison are entitled to live well. For Simone, her
clients experienced racism on a constant and blatant basis. She said the following when pondering on what her clients experience after incarceration:

Simone: Okay. Um, I worked with a one particular man who came from a reservation north of Missoula, and he had a really terrible time with an employer who was using racial slurs to criticize him when he wasn't doing his work well. Um, I actually, I had a, I had a number of people report that. Yeah, I think that those things came up. I think reports of racial slurs being used and of racism being perceived by the client. Those stories came up pretty, pretty regularly, I would say.

The participants stories once again suggest that the idea of “serving time” has little to do with being in a carceral setting. It is also so stressful that some clients unfortunately commit crimes to return to a setting that has structure and order. Mia’s recollection brings this point home:

Mia: I have met some clients I believe, I believe I have a client now who committed a crime just to go back and because he spent 21 years in prison. So, I think that that's something that he's used to. And I think that he is afraid of being out in, you know, in the real world and free.

Summary

The findings reveal that practitioners consider the incarceration experience to be one that is stressful. Participants reinforced the notion that the incarceration experience was also one made up of phases. In those phases, clients were believed to experience an array of events that prompted stress and affected wellness. In reinforcing the notion that stressful phases of incarceration were possible, participants also legitimized the notion that stress was long-lasting. It was important to allow participants to speak on the construct of trauma on their own and allude to trauma criterion. Throughout this phase of questioning, the language of trauma was not used. It is with these reflections in mind that one can consider the incarceration experience to be traumatic and stressful for the justice
involved client. The upcoming sections of findings will report on how participants engaged with the specific construct of racism-based trauma.

**Defining Racism-Based Trauma**

A pivotal point in understanding the construct of racism-based trauma was identifying how social workers defined racism-based trauma. Engaging with how the construct is conceptualized and defined was important for a few reasons. Because the construct is rooted within the field of Psychology, it was important to consider how other disciplines engaged with the construct. I believe that this cross-discipline approach to defining the construct both aids in how the construct is understood and how the definition can be expanded. How one conceptualizes the construct also reveals how one views racism and how one may assess for it an intervention setting. How one defines the construct also prompts the social worker to think about how the construct may be defined to colleagues and clients.

Participants were asked to explain how the construct of racism-based trauma would be explained to a colleague or client. This was expected to be difficult for the participants as any prior engagement with the construct was non-existent. Participants were relied upon to pull from their perceptions and expertise to conceptualize the construct and produce the richest response. Meghan said, “I don’t know, that’s a really tough question” while Eliza simply said, “I don’t know how I would do that.” Participants did take time to ponder and consider the meaning of racism-based trauma. The following themes emerged in the participants conceptualizations and definition of racism-based trauma: considering the experience to be unknown by the victim,
considering the experience to be impacted by place and locale and considering the experience as one that is long-lasting.

**Unknowingly experiencing racism-based trauma.**

There was an awareness and sensitivity to the fact that the client was unable to recognize what was being experienced as a result of racism. This belief further emphasizes the critical role of the social worker to be an assessor, as well as an advocate. Meghan stated that she thought that the clients in her practice “didn’t even realize that what they were experiencing was racism.” Eliza went on to conceptualize that at the root of experiencing racism-based trauma, there was a sense of feeling the stress without knowing how to identify it. Eliza says, “I think racist trauma, at its core, is about the fact that you don’t know if something is being done because of who you are as a person or because of what you’re doing.” Herman also mentioned that to experience racism-based trauma was to be “affected by it to the point where you can’t get over it” and that it “comes back.” This notion of experiencing a traumatic event without realizing the source of the event is puzzling. There is the notion that the justice system is broken. Beyond the broken justice system, one can consider the impact that this has on the social worker and client relationship. If one is unable to identify the source of stress or stress, the stress is not alleviated. This theme undermines the rehabilitative nature of the justice system and inadvertently cripples the intervention and therapeutic relationship. Additionally, participants expressed a level of frustration at the larger system and sympathy for their clients. To provide more context, Rose said the following:

Rose: You know, I think, so I just want to talk about a few things. Like, sort of similar to judges and not understanding “why.” Everybody in pop culture is addicted to true crime documentaries. You go onto Netflix and the most popular
stuff is crime stuff and you’re like, “What the fuck, this is like being at work.” Honestly, our clients, our clients aren’t some criminal masterminds. They are also confused and often ask why? Like, “I don’t understand why I keep doing this.” So yeah, when your clients don’t know why they do the things that they do, there’s a huge indication that some larger structures are going on.

Rose’s comments also allude to the notion that clients are interested in understanding their behavior. More importantly, clients are interested in understanding their history and their place within society. The lack of truly being able to understand, interpret, and alleviate this particular stress leads to unhealthy normalization and acceptance. This point became clearer after Harriet and Angela stated that explaining involves some sort of realization and awakening:

Harriet: Um, I think would I don't know if it's going to answer this question. But I think the thing with the clients is making them realize that some of the things that they suffered, some of the treatments that they've received are not normal. I think that's the problem. We have a tendency to normalize so many bad things that happen in our lives. And it's not normal. And, you know, because this has been all they've ever known, and all they've ever seen from relatives, and, you know, brothers, uncles, fathers, or whatever, this trauma, they don't see it as a trauma, they see it, it's just, that's their life.

Angela: Saying to my clients, “Hey, did you know that statistically speaking, it was more likely as a man of color blah, blah, blah.” Like, not like that. But, when a guy is like, “You know, I just feel like they're always targeting me, man, like, everywhere I go in my neighborhood.” Being able to be like, “Do you know what, actually your area is targeted statistically more than anywhere else in the city. That's a fact.” For them to be able to hear words like, “No, that actually happens. Like, that's not just you, amplifying shit. It's real. I think race-based trauma, the feeling of it is that sense of worry, that sense of uneasiness. It's like a perceptive uneasiness when you walk through the world.

This act of explaining through awakening also alluded to the significance of the racial development stages and its place within the construct. In these findings, I realized that an unknown experience with racism was to be expected when one lives in America. More specifically, the theme of experiencing something unknown directly alludes to the
negative implications of what occurs when race is assigned to someone from the moment that he or she is born.

It was to be expected at some point during the research that the participants would ponder on their experiences and their place within this “intervention dance.” In being unable to define the construct, participants themselves reinforced the notion that the experience is one that is often times unknown. For more context, I included Monique’s and Mia’s reflections:

Monique: It's definitely come up for me as a worker. Um, one thing I didn't think about until closer to the end of my internship, um, was kind of how triggered I was sometimes in a way that I wasn’t aware of.”

Mia: “Well, well, I have not experienced it. I have not experienced personally, but I know a lot of people that have, and I know I watched the news and I understand the things that are going on in America today. Although, and I say I haven't had it, I say I haven't had the same experiences, but I know that there are a lot of people around me who have had those experiences. As a black woman. Um, I have, I can, I can say, I know what it feels like to think or to believe that someone doesn't like black people, because of the way that they acted when you come around or their demeanor.

Mia was unable to provide a definition of racism-based trauma and had also not engaged with the construct. Mia was also clear in stating that she had not experienced racism-based trauma. I did ask Mia a follow-up question to her declaration to avoid any potential feelings of duress or critique. Nevertheless, Mia’s insistence on not experiencing a trauma that she did not understand suggested that an engagement with the construct, providing treatments, and assessments would be a timely process. Experiencing racism-based-trauma unknowingly is not strictly reserved for the client. This research, while interested in understanding the experiences of the incarcerated person, is also interested in understanding the experiences of the practitioner. This symbiotic relationship often
prompted in the social work setting involves a constant exchange between the client and
the worker. It is an intricate and intimate dance that requires time and consideration.

**Experiencing long-lasting racism-based trauma.**

Rose: I would imagine it as generational and extremely traumatic. I’ve actually
never read a definition.

Monique: I guess it would, the first thing I would say is just like trauma, ongoing
trauma on the daily.

In their conceptualizations of racism-based trauma, the participants sparked the
notion that racism-based trauma could be an experience that lasts throughout the course
of the lifespan. Eliza declared that when thinking about racism-based trauma, one had to
consider the “hundreds of years of racialized trauma that have come before that.”
Participants, at least when mentioning the construct, placed it within the context of
experiencing racism in America. Considering the tenure of racism with the country adds
to the seriousness of the construct. The long-lasting nature of experiencing racism-based
trauma also conveys some hopelessness that the construct is inescapable as Simone
mentioned:

Simone: Um, yeah, so, there are so many ways to describe it. It’s really
longitudinal, right? It's not something that can be escaped or avoided or
controlled by the individual who's experiencing it.

This trauma as being one “not being able to move past or let go of because it is
recurring,” as Mia described, is important for the practitioner to consider. It is important
for the practitioner not remain lost in hopelessness. The notion of the construct being
inescapable also prompts one to be aware of one’s identity and the strength in developing
a healthy identity.
Accentuating racism-based trauma based on location.

In the participant’s discussion of race and defining the construct, the emphasis on one’s location became increasingly important. Participants were very reflective of how their clients experienced racial oppression in their geographical location. There was this allusion that one is more likely to be affected by the racism-based trauma if one lived in a specific region or area. For Meghan, the fact that her clients experienced “racism in the deep south” meant that one had to be particularly aware of practices and policies that affected the southern region of the country. Carmella focused on the experience of racism in the South, as well.

Carmella: Well, because I feel like in certainly this country, but definitely in Alabama, where I work, most of the clients that I work for, if not all of them, have issues that are related to systemic racism, they also have mental health issues, cognitive issues, you know, long standing, neglect and abuse. Meghan’s and Carmella’s focus on a particular region also suggested that one would need to educate the client on the history of racism within the south. This finding also prompted the thought as to how one would provide a lesson on the geographical location and racism. One potentially aids the client by educating them. One also runs the risk of overwhelming the client with a history that is often unknown and undiscussed. The theme of region or locale influencing racism was strengthened by Eliza and Simone. Oftentimes it may be easy for those engaging with race and racism at a superficial level to think that it is more prominent in the South. Eliza and Simone challenge this assumption as follows:

Eliza: You know, Philly's a very black city, it's, you know, it's like, 40% Black, 38% white. And, you know, so a lot of a lot of the correctional officers are black as well. So, there's that complicated component of, yeah, of, like, you know, black people within kind of acting as actors in this racialized system, right?
Simone: But I think, yeah, I think um getting to leave Montana - like I grew up in Oregon, and Montana made Oregon look diverse, which is not great. Because Oregon is also like, not very diverse racially. So, I think, yeah, coming to the South, and being in a space where, where we have to talk about race and racism because it's happening, like consistently on a day-to-day basis, like in the institution I'm going to school. Like, I could point out so many things that my co-workers in Montana were doing that were racists, but there was not a space that that was like a conversation. Let me tell, okay, one year at the Halloween party, the executive director, who is a social worker came dressed as a Mexican. Like, what do you do with that?

Having thoughtful discussions and considerations as to their racism occurs seems to also identify who perpetuates racism and prejudices.

Maintaining an awareness of one’s location as it relates to race seems to have some implications into how one approaches the justice system to better serve the client. For instance,

Nasir: Again, when you look at the South from the East from the West from the North but then you also have to look at it within the South and being in the South. I’ll tell you like this, this might make sense to you. You can't try a case the same way in Jackson that you can in Tupelo. You can't try a case in Tupelo, the same way you would do in Leakesville, Mississippi because there are cultures within cultures even within those different aspects of counties throughout Mississippi.

This description from Nasir suggests a high level of nuance involved in advocating effectively for the client. Based on these findings, one needs to be aware and knowledgeable of one’s geographical area of practice. A level of expertise in the history of where one lives could be an asset. This also aids in building rapport and access to better serve the client. If the notion that the justice-involved client is traumatized from the justice system is meaningful to the practitioner, it should be assumed that the client may not even trust the social worker. Monique mentions this in describing her work in a Louisiana city rich in culture and racial heritage:

Monique: Um, I think that it's challenging to work in environments where, you know, where, our clients are majority black, and our work environment is
majority white. There are racial differences. There are cultural differences, you
know, how many people are from New Orleans in the office, how many people
are not from New Orleans. I think that, that, the biggest thing I can think of is
like, building rapport with clients and their families is sometimes you have to go
the extra mile.

The Dichotomization of the Construct

There was also an overwhelming emphasis on the construct only being
experienced by Black or African-Americans and White Americans. Angela lamented in
saying that “you are never good enough as a black person to walk in the world as some of
your white counterparts.” Herman simply stated that “it mainly affects African-
Americans.” To be more specific, participants almost always considered the experience
of a Black or African-American person as the one experiencing the racism-based injury.
The considerations, while thoughtful, were unprompted as no specific racial groups were
mentioned by me in my questioning. The considerations, like Eliza’s, were also poignant.

Eliza: And yeah, it's, so it's interesting. I mean, I think that, you know, there was
a study last year that showed that women from like, like, women from Africa,
like African women, not African-American women, African women, - their
children, like had a certain level of cortisol or something in their bodies, like, and
then it was just showing, like, the, the actual, like, physical manifestation of
racialized stress in black people in the United States, because it is so constant.

The perpetrator of the racist injury was always a White or European descended person.

This could have been influenced by the fact that all of the participants have practiced
social work in the United States of America and are familiar with the country’s history. I
also found that the idea of being informed with racial identity development stages is so
impactful. For the participants, White people and whiteness were the perpetrator of this
construct that they were engaging with for the first time. Simone said the following when
asked if she had engaged with racial identity development in any form:
Simone: Historically, white people have considered whiteness to be neutral and that is not true, that white is also a race. Anyone who identifies as white also needs to work on developing their racial identity and acknowledging that that's what it is. It is a racial identity.

I also considered the impact that I had as a man who presents as Black or African-American. This can be seen in Meghan’s continued response in describing the construct to the best of her ability:

Meghan: I feel like as a white female I can't ever truly explain what it’s like to be a black man in this country. I can empathize and I can tell you what my friends say. I can tell you what I've read in books. But theory and stories only take me so far.

While not asked in a follow up question, this dichotomization involves a good level of awareness on behalf of the practitioner. Nevertheless, it is of my belief that recognizing the racial construct and history in America is only one element in addressing and alleviating the stress. How one intends to use this “dichotomizing viewpoint” to positively inform practice and education is meaningful. Carmella inadvertently addressed the need to related consideration into practice by stating the following:

Carmella: So, building rapport with them takes a while, because they've been let down pretty much by everybody in their life, for the most part. And so, building rapport with them is, can be a challenge. And especially if, for me, you know, as a white middle-aged woman, you know, a lot of my clients are African-American, you know, so, kind of getting over that, you know, racial wall that can be between us.

Admittedly, this dichotomization of the construct indicated that the participants innately recognized that the construct requires a perpetrator and a victim. Nevertheless, this finding leads to future investigations into whether or not one’s presenting or assumed race has an impact on one’s ability to engage with the construct of racism-based trauma. If any merit can be placed on the fact that participants automatically dichotomized the experience because of my racial appearance, it also emphasizes the importance of being
familiar with racial identity development and awareness. If a person does not identify as a member of a certain race but has the race assigned to him or her, it could potentially harm the relationship. If a person is not mature in racial identity, there may also be a feeling of guilt and self-doubt. This feeling emerged in Rose’s interview and prompted a pause in the interview to allow her to cry and gather her thoughts:

   Rose: In a way, like, I feel responsible. I feel conscious. Because I feel like it would be a disservice to not talk about it. Like, I don’t talk to my white clients about it.

Simone also reflected greatly on her identity as a White, cisgender woman. In Simone’s discussion of whiteness and the practices of her white colleagues and associates, it became clear that she took responsibility for them. This theme of dichotomizing also suggests that the White practitioner may take on the responsibility of all white counterparts. It is important for one to be confident in oneself and identity to not only help the client but to also maintain wellness. Simone’s comments are as follows:

   Simone: Yeah, how do I - um I do still struggle, as you can see, when talking about race and how to do it in a way that I feel like it's representing what I'm saying appropriately. And um, and I'm trying not to make too many assumptions or wide, sweeping statements. I think one of the things that I've really tried to do over the last couple of years is be less flippant in how I talk about race. Um, it's really easy in white communities to say things like, “Oh, well, white people are the worst, you know,” like, “white men are the worst” and just sort of like, write it off as being like, “everybody knows what I mean, when I say that.” So, it's okay to just make that broad statement. And that's just generally accepted. Because I think that speaking about race and whiteness, in that flippant way, doesn't give it the weight that it needs.

These reflections occurred for a majority of the participants whom identified as White female or woman practitioners. Carmella seemed to be the only White participant to suggest that some form of sensitivity and ally ship after acknowledging one’s whiteness was possible. She said the following:
Carmella: I think I've always known it's there. But I think, you know, just
because like, my, my insight for that and this work, like, I think I've probably
always really known that. I mean, especially because I went to, so I was educated
at a HBCU (Historically Black College or University), right? So, you know, I
mean, I definitely learned a lot there. As far as, like, when you're talking about
race-based trauma. I mean, it goes all the way back to slavery.

To be clear, this theme adds more specificity and understanding to the construct from a
practitioner’s perspective. The theme also communicates the following: that no race other
than White people can perpetuate racism-based injuries and that other People of Color
may not experience the stress as severely as Black or African-Americans.

**Summary of Section I**

In conceptualizing racism-based trauma, participants were presented with a
particular setting and prompted to explore if racism-based trauma occurred in that setting.
Participants were able to be critical to an extent and consider the impact that one’s
physical appearance had on one’s lived experience in the justice system. Participants
were able to consider the racialized experience of their client and were given an
opportunity to define the construct of racism-based trauma. How social work participants
conceptualized the construct was by considering it to be one involving Black or African-
Amercians as the victim and White Americans or European Descendant people as the
perpetrator. Participants also considered the experience to be an unknown and
unidentifiable experience to the victim, one impacted by place and locale and one that is
long-lasting. It is with these themes in mind that I find that an alternative definition of
racism-based trauma is appropriate. It is as follows: An often unbeknownst and
persistently stressful reaction to a covert or overt racially oppressive situation potentially
accentuated by place or locale.
Section II: The Extent of Interventional Engagement with Racism-Based Trauma

This section suggests that despite being unable to define racism-based trauma, there was still some sort of engagement with the construct. Participants thought about how to better serve their clients. I highlight two critical themes that emerged from the interviews regarding the extent at which participants have engaged with or thought about engaging with racism-based trauma experienced by the client. Those themes are as follows: minimally engaging with the construct of racism-based trauma and assessing and responding to the client with consideration. These findings aid in answering the third research question which is as follows: To what extent do justice system social workers in a justice system setting engage with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad?

Minimally Engaging with the Construct

With respect to the participants, the extent to which the participants engage with racism-based trauma is minimal and infrequent, at best. Participants seemed to engage with the construct in trainings guised in discussing the racial experience but were something else completely. For the study, participants then shifted and engaged with the construct of racism-based trauma by thinking about how they would engage with the construct. This section of the interview shifted from an inquiry into practice experience to how one could engage with a construct. This was the case despite there being a difficulty in conceptualizing and defining the construct.

Because consideration to racism-based trauma was given after asking participants to define the construct, participants were asked in what ways they had been trained or read scholarship of racism-based trauma. Harriet replied, “Not at all,” Mia stated,” I
haven’t but I wish that I had,” and Rachel reported, “None.” This lack of training was the consensus among the participants. This remained the case and altered slightly in regards the lacking training but wishing that training resources were available and doubting the efficiency of any pseudo-trainings. Regarding the lack of resources, Meghan stated the following:

Meghan: So that's a tough question. Because, I feel like, I struggle to find resources on that. I don't think, I don't know if it's necessarily fair to say agency-wide but I feel like the programs I were in, don't always take that into consideration.

Even if training had been available, the findings indicate that the content would be insufficient or veiled as something other than on racism related stress. Simone brings this point home in the following narrative:

Simone: Um, and that was really meaningful, because I think a lot of education sort of loosely, and a lot of people in the world loosely talk about racism, but not actually the impact of that being identified as a trauma and racial, racially charged acts being experienced as trauma. It was definitely something I picked up and learned along the way. In my grad program I had a diversity course, the first semester, and then we like, never used the word diversity again, you know *laughs*. Like, it wasn’t addressed to its fullest, I would say. It's, I have felt like it's isolated and ace and racism are often treated as an isolated issue that we address in a training session, or a workshop or a class session and then we, like, move on with our lives, as opposed to integrating it into every aspect of what we're learning and doing and seeing. I think it needs to be really more directly incorporated. I think the phrase "culturally humble" is sort of like the academic approach that is currently being taught and employed. But I do think that it's really important to distinguish culture and race as being while integrated, not the same thing. Not interchangeable words.

Simone’s comments arose after also being paused and asked to consider her social work educational program and experience. This question was asked of all participants and yielded statements such as Mia’s aforementioned statement. This lack of training appeared to be a missed opportunity on behalf of the programs. The lack of training also
prompted the feeling of not knowing how to truly engage with race – let alone racism-based trauma. Eliza summates this point and the theme as follows:

Eliza: The majority of our students were young, white women, you know, who were you know, 22 to 26 and you know, we had a lot of great students, you know? But it was often a real challenge. Like we did role plays and stuff but there was no, “How do you talk about racism with clients?” Like what does that look like, you know? Just talking about race is not doing anything other than like perpetuating this nonsense about like color blindness in my program.

Assessing and Responding with Consideration

Participants were expected to not have received a great degree of training regarding racism-based trauma. Nevertheless, the questions in the questionnaire were designed to allow participants to think about the construct and to not diminish any engagement with the construct. I believed that any thought given to the construct was constructive and critical to the larger goal of the study. To those ends, participants were asked to describe how they would assess and respond to a client who they believed was experiencing racism-based trauma. This theme and the findings are important for more than simply answering the research question. It is my belief that oftentimes one may not be familiar with a phenomena or stressor. Nevertheless, the social worker is charged with addressing the stressor as best as possible under one’s generalist practice approach and the code of ethics.

Acknowledging and validating.

In assessing and responding to a client presenting with racism-based trauma, participants indicated that the best approach to take was to acknowledge and validate. For the participant, the need to validate hints at how important it is to make the client believe that what they experienced is real. There seemed to be an assumption that not every
person would be sensitive to the trauma. Harriet said, “I think validation is so key because you feel like no one understands what's happened to you and everyone is downplaying what may have happened to you.” This was a thoughtful consideration as clients may not know what they are experiencing and because the client may constantly return to a setting during which the trauma occurs. To this end, a “retraumatization” to racism-based stress seems plausible. The validation utilized in the intervention setting may also aid in the development of a healthy racial identity for the client. This leads to a future consideration that a treatment to racism-based trauma may rely on the development of a healthy racial identity. Simone speaks on validation and the relevance of racial identity in the following narrative:

Simone: Yeah, responding. I mean, what I learned from my practice - which seems pretty, like a basic social work rule – is to just acknowledge and validate. I think that like we've talked about already, like race identity. It is real and to be able to talk to somebody about it is really important. And so to validate feelings that somebody is having, like, around experiences with their racial identity is the first step in working on responding to someone who's experiencing it.

This approach alludes to the importance of developing one’s racial identity. Participants already indicated a lack of training with the construct and a sense of discomfort or survivors’ guilt. In being aware of one’s identity and developing the comfort, assessing may not be as difficult. I think that it’s also important to think about how to respond in a practice or intervention setting because time is of the essence. If we operate based on the updated definition and under the assumption of laws being utilized to racially oppress people in a number of settings, the likelihood of experiencing a racist event again is high. It is because of this fear of the client experiencing a repeated event of racism that participants also saw providing validation as an empowering tool. Specific to the justice system social worker but worth considering for everyone is the idea that one is engaging
with the client in the same setting that the racism event occurred in. Empowering the client is vital and Monique speaks to this in the following narrative:

Monique: I think it's hard to respond, it's felt hard to respond, especially when they're disclosing to me racial stress, such as the feeling of the being targeted by the police, but they're in a jail setting. And I feel kind of powerless. I think my way of responding, like I said, is just acknowledging and validating that like, “yes, things are very unfair”, and just like doing work, to explore the strengths that they do have, and like, what exists outside of that.

For Carmella, validation becomes empowering because the client is given the permission to talk about and disclose one’s feelings. In considering the traumatic effects of the incarceration experience, it is clear that an amount of suppression on one’s autonomy and voice occurs. One’s thoughts and words are policed just as much as one’s body is policed. Carmella’s narrative regarding validation encourages the return of that power removed by a racist system:

Carmella: So, my usual approach is about giving them permission, getting rapport with me, and being able to talk about it. I don’t want to minimize it. I want to start to gather the information for them. And that can be tough because, you know, they can come out and talk with me and maybe show some emotions, They’ve been acknowledging the fear, the anxiety and the depression, but then have to turn around and go right back to death row.

Overall, this idea of validation was one that was consistent amongst the practitioners.

This approach is also one that practitioners were willing to do over a long period of time. Angela felt as though “gently discussing” the event of experiencing racism in a validating way prepared the client to be introduced to the “myriad of ways that it showed up in their daily life.” From validating the event and empowering the client, participants seemed to present a follow-up procedure that I coded as “educating the client.”

Educating the client.
When considering the participants' definition of racism-based trauma and the fact that the trauma is often unbeknownst to the client, it became important for practitioners to educate the clients on the construct. As said by Nasir, “It's a whole lot easier if they understand their culture. So being culturally sound or culturally competent is always the best way to approach it.” I found that despite being able to easily define the construct of racism-based trauma, participants were still willing to educate the client on the construct. In educating the client on the construct, participants also alluded to educating clients on how to be critics of a racialized system. It was the participants’ emphasis on education that indicates another possible treatment involves the act of educating. This is important to consider.

While the incarceration setting is the focal point for the study, it is helpful to recall that racism-based trauma can occur in a number of settings. When the trauma occurs, it is posited that the victim will attempt to navigate the legal system in order to gain some form of penance and justice. To navigate the system more effectively, one engages in the Critical Race Theory activity of revisionist history and analyzing policies and practices in an objective and clear manner. For the oppressor, arguing against facts is a bit more difficult than arguing against perception. Harriet makes this point clear when she emphasized how having validating and honest conversations with her clients may aid in their defense:

Harriet: You know, I do know that there's discrimination out there. But one thing that I try to get our clients to see is that – “Okay, if you are robbing a bank, it doesn't matter what racial, ethnic group you are. You know, it didn't matter what racial background you come from - robbing a bank is robbing a bank. If you were followed from your house to the bank, and you were just going to withdraw some money then I can see that but it just, you know, that's why I want to know the entire story and all the details of everything that's going on, you know, I don't want to hear all the time well, you know, the police on like me, because I'm black.
Well, let's talk about that. Let's talk about why you feel that way and the system as a whole.

This education component of responding certainly places the tools into the hands of the person experiencing the trauma. Angela continues the notion as follows:

Angela: I think the other thing is that like, it can be empowering because you can help support your client as they develop the language and awareness around their own possibility, and how they can navigate these spaces. I think those of us who are socially conscious and aware make different choices and can be strategic. We can calculate, we can advocate, we can do certain things.

Angela’s last statement regarding being socially conscious and aware alludes to the privilege that the practitioner has in his or her work. This is not the case for the racism traumatized person. This theme of education is important and also one that requires the practitioner easing into it. At this point in the interview, participants were introduced to the concepts of trauma, racism-based trauma, and it’s place within the justice system.

Critical engagements with one’s racial identity is key if education is the approach taken to engage with the client. A healthy racial identity development will prevent the practitioner from overwhelming the client and from perpetuating more harm, hopefully.

This position arises after reading Meghan’s thoughts on educating the client:

Meghan: But this client had no education of, like, the history of segregation or slavery. Like, none of that. He didn't understand what had happened in this country. And so when I start explaining all these things, and I'm, you know, telling him, “Hey, the system, isn’t really fair.”

For the social work practitioner, aiding the client in the most efficient and timely manner is the goal. It is just as important to remember that if oneself or social work colleagues are unable to understand the constructs of race, that clients may also lag. This point is reiterated to indicate how easy it appears one can transition from being a help to a hinderance in the intervention dynamic.
Going rogue.

Providing relief in the presence of the trauma is the intended goal of conducting an assessment and response. However, I also made note of at least two response approaches that may hinder the intervention dynamic. This approach that I have identified as “going rogue” is not to scold Rachel and Nasir. The approach is included to emphasize how important understanding racial identity and the ability to offer a thoughtful critique of a racist justice system. To take it upon oneself to rely on knowledge that one just acknowledged was not present, was something I found to be perplexing. I also found that even in conceptualizing the construct and offering a method to assess and treat the trauma, practitioners may still practice in a manner that they feel is best. Rachel and Nasir’s thoughts are as follows:

Rachel: Oh, Lord. Um, I'm not going lie. I just be doing my own thing, Curtis. *Laughs* I just be doing my own thing. I mean, I'm not gonna say that I haven't, like read something about it. I have read about it. But it just comes natural to me. I just do, I just do whatever I needed. I'm fine with reading something out of a textbook. But if you're in a situation, I'm not worried about what the textbook says. I'm here working with you trying to figure out what it is, we need to get done.

Nasir: I worked in the mental health agency for a while. I worked in the hospital for a while and I worked every area of a hospital, including mental health. You take that and you put it with my life experiences growing up in that low-income community and seeing my first death at 14 - you know, knowing what it's like to have people shooting around you. You take that and you know what poverty looks like. You have that conversation with them and simply ask "How are you doing or, you know, tell me something about yourself." Kind of giving them an opportunity to talk rather than being spoken to, um, it's so many different factors, man. There's no book that can tell you exactly how to go in and do it because, each person is different.

Nasir’s comments presented as contradictory to his actions as he was willingly and knowingly participating a research project focused on impacting Social Work pedagogy,
curricula, practice approaches, and scholarship. I posit that a deeper critique of the justice system and an analysis of one’s racial identity would debunk Nasir’s comments. As mentioned earlier, Nasir acknowledged his experience of racism and being “othered.” I found that Nasir’s thoughts of going rogue or relying on his experience, while well intentioned, had negative implications on the client. I also posit that Nasir, in answering my questions, pondered on his experience as a racism-based trauma victim. It is of that finding and belief that going rogue is a response approach that may negatively impact the intervention as a whole.

**Summary of Section II**

Participants welcome the notion of assessing and responding to racism-based trauma experienced by the incarcerated person. This willingness to assess and respond seems to be ideal in spite of the participants not being knowledgeable of the construct. The extent to which participants engage with racism-based trauma is minimal. Nevertheless, the findings indicate that the participants are willing to engage in the future with consideration, validation, and meaningful trainings. As evidenced by the section, participants are also willing to engage in conversations about the construct.

**Section III: Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Engagement with the Construct**

Maintaining the notion that the engagement with the construct is an interpersonal and intrapersonal experience, this section provides themes related to challenges and difficulties in engaging with the construct. Beyond answering the final question of the research, this section explored the participants knowledge of themselves, their knowledge of racial identity development, and their comfort related to engaging with the construct.
In discussing comfort, participants parsed out what challenges they believed to be the most salient in their engagement with the construct. The themes identified are as follows: being unfamiliar with Racial Identity Development, maintaining comfort in engagement, navigating a challenge, and benefitting one’s practice setting.

**Unfamiliarity with Racial Identity Development**

As it relates to effectively engage with racism-based trauma, the understanding of oneself aids in the understanding of others. This exploration was not framed to embarrass the participant; therefore, participants were asked to discuss in what ways they engaged with racial identity development. Being unfamiliar with Racial Identity Development arose after being asked in what ways the participants have been trained or read scholarship on the processes. There was an overall lack of engagement with Racial Identity Development theory and its components. Carmella said, “I don’t think I’ve been trained on them. I’m not even sure what that is.” Other participants indicated their lack of engagement with the construct and placed some amount of onus on their social work programs. “So, my university and program had a lot of faults. We only talked a little about American racism,” said Eliza. Monique echoed Eliza and said the following:

Monique: Um, I would say that's another thing that's just, like, deeply personal to me that hasn't been explored in an academic scholarly setting for me. No, no. Yeah, these are things that haven't been touched on in academic settings. They've been mentioned but have not been explored. No, I would love to take trainings on it. I would love to read more about it, to talk more about it. It's something that was touched on at my school - the concept of historical and intergenerational trauma as a concept. I'd really like to explore what it means in practice. I've spoken to some other social workers of color, just in the community in conversation about how, um, you know, when we're, we're pathologizing things without considering kind of, like important things that should be taken into consideration, like historical trauma, slavery and intergenerational trauma, like, what does it mean to consider that in practice?
Even in Monique reporting on the potential learning gaps in her educational experience, she also indicated an interest to learn more about the theory. This was the case for other participants like Rachel, who felt as though exploring the theory would bode well for practice. Her comments are as follows:

Rachel: Um, I haven't. I think that I would like to be more informed. So that way, when you come across somebody who may have experienced this, like actually legit ass experienced this, you're able to, um, again, assess and address appropriately so that you're not being offensive and you're able to be empathetic and you're able to work with them through it. Because I think that if you're not knowledgeable of it, then you're just going on doing whatever not paying attention to different signs or things that these people are telling you when it's very crucial information that can help you actually break through as far as knowing who that person is, understanding what they've been through and helping them get past it.

Rachel’s comments also hinted at this notion of one’s legitimacy in reporting the experience of racism-based trauma. I find that one of the potential strengths of applying the racial identity development lens to the construct is that it help practitioners avoid questioning the legitimacy of the experience. The role of the practitioner, in assessment and treatment, is to identify and aid the client. Understanding racial identity and developmental stages for oneself and for others should decrease the likelihood of the practitioner declaring that a person is malingering. I also find that this lack of engaging with the construct could also mean that engaging with the construct is overwhelming. Engaging with the construct also involves “opening up the floodgates” to the effects and injuries from racism. It will be a daunting experience for the practitioner when a majority of clients, including the practitioner, report some form of racism-based trauma. A healthy engagement with racial identity development can keep one well and grounded.
Participants were able to recognize that engagement and took it upon themselves to couple their knowledge in the classroom with the knowledge learned outside of the classroom. Angela shared her thoughts as it related to this:

Angela: Um, I took an advanced seminar about, like, how to have different and difficult conversations around the “isms.” I did that like, maybe three years ago. I think before that - I would even say going back to my undergrad - I took a class in like Caribbean Afro-Latino literature and I remember the teacher attempting to talk about like the diaspora. Um, but like side note, my stepfather was also a social worker. He was a revolutionary and an activist in East Harlem. I think well before I entered any sort of like formal training, he trained me as a teenager right? I'm pretty sure he was training me to be some sort of like revolutionary because he would have me read like Karl Marx, Che Guevara. He would talk to me about Fidel and communism and socialism and the patriarchy. He would talk to me about Audrey Lord. He would talk to me about James Baldwin. Like, all of these major players in like how black and brown folks conceptualize themselves. So, I think I had a lot of racial identity development kind of have to personally and then from education.

The anecdotes that Angela heard from her family and from other settings hints at this notion that racial identity development occurs unbeknownst and outside of the a formal educational setting. I find this to be a strength in engaging with the processes amongst colleagues and clients. The goal of engaging is to bring awareness and avoid “othering” the client. It is important to acknowledge that the processes are fluid and a natural process for a majority of people living in America. Engaging with the processes in a thoughtful manner also holds one accountable and makes certain comments a bit more palatable.

This was the case when asking Nasir about his training on the developmental processes. Admittedly, Nasir’s comments sparked the feeling of wanting to challenge his statements. There was an assumption that race and racial identity development could only be discussed in certain settings. I would like to include Nasir’s comments as a point of context and reference:
Nasir: I don't think I've, um, I've ever been trained for that. Again, I think it might have come up when we started talking about being culturally competent, because, again, I went to a HBCU. So in our classes, we always addressed us. It's HBCU, you know, we always had that conversation about African Americans. You know going to a historically black college, we talked about culture on a whole ‘nother level. We talked about racism on a whole ‘nother level because you're in a room full of black professors and black students. We all talked about our experiences growing up. What I'm saying to you is we've had this conversation. So, my social work experience within that classroom setting was a bit different, because it was a HBCU. We talked about things you wouldn't talk about at Ole Miss, or at a predominantly white school. We talked about situations within our own communities.

Nasir’s comments reinforced the racial dichotomy that I spoke of earlier. It also suggests that there may need to be a racism-based trauma type specifically focusing on the black experience. I found that Nasir’s comments, as a result of not engaging with the developmental theory, were also dismissive of the experiences of other people of color. I found that Nasir’s comments were not intended to be inconsiderate but were inconsiderate in their potential impact, respectfully. Nasir’s comments also undermined the reality that even the people of one’s own race have the potential to prompt some form of racism-based trauma. Who is allowed to hold a colloquy about racial disparities, who should talk, and who should listen, were all alluded to by Nasir.

In these considerations, I did not challenge Nasir and allowed him to express him freely. This was done partly because effective qualitative interviews nurture the freedom of expression and narratives. I also found that that instance was an opportunity to see in real time the benefit of engaging with racial identity development and having a mature identity status. Because I have achieved a level of internalization as mentioned by the theory, Nasir’s opinions were able to be nurtured without causing a disruption in my opinions or foci. The participants narratives on a lack of engagement, coupled with my
reflection, ultimately indicated that engagement with the developmental processes is wanted and advantageous.

**Maintaining Comfort**

After being asked about how comfortable one would feel in engaging with the construct, Mia beamed and said, “I feel comfortable talking about it with them.” Despite a lack of engagement with the processes of racial identity development, participants felt resoundingly comfortable with engaging with the construct. Herman said, “I feel comfortable with it. I feel like it’s a big need.” Meghan echoed Herman by simply stating, “Um, I think, um, I would say that now, I feel pretty comfortable with those conversations.” Nasir, even after his heartfelt narratives felt “100% confident and comfortable.” More detailed discussions came from Simone and Rose. I found that in their responses, their level of comfort was in regard to the self-awareness. This reinforcing the notion that being aware of one’s race in the larger context can be advantageous to the client. Their comments are as follows:

Rose: Um, I feel comfortable but also insecure because I know that I am not the one that needs to be the translator of these issues. I feel like I shouldn’t be the one who is responsible for communicating these larger, systemic, built in, prevalent, systems of oppression in each and every one of our cases. I just feel totally inadequate, but I can talk about it.

Simone: Oh, I feel pretty comfortable. I mean, not in the sense that I'm like, happy about it. I'm devastated. It's a difficult conversation, but I'm not shying away from it. I typically take the stance of like, if it feels uncomfortable, that's because it's obviously not right.

Rose’s comments were found to sobering. As the interview progressed, Rose’s level of reflection and sadness increased. It was visible. I also found that in Rose’s comments, one may find comfort in realizing that this engagement with racism-based trauma and race as a whole is a practice. One cannot be faulted for acknowledging and developing.
Rachel, admittingly young and budding as a social worker, acknowledges that her level of comfort has come from continued work. She said the following:

Rachel: Um, back then I was uncomfortable about everything, because I was a little baby. But as far as now, I'm willing to talk with anybody about anything. So it's not uncomfortable for me to be able to talk, if they want, if that's something that they want to talk about, then I can talk about.

An underlying goal of the study is to understand and to improve practice. In the following narrative, Eliza spoke on the idea of comfortability and reinforced that it was more than acceptable if the practitioner was uncomfortable:

Eliza: I mean, I felt pretty confident and comfortable. It's, that, you know, I think I feel like one of my mantras over the years has been like, "You know, if you don't, if you don't feel, if you're not figuring out like how to be comfortable being uncomfortable then like I don't think you're doing this right." You know, like and it's not, I think I'm comfortable having this conversation. These conversations are not easy and as a white woman I also want to make sure I'm taking a backseat and not you know, that I'm not driving.

I also found that in feeling comfortable, participants wanted their clients to feel comfortable and be the expert. This is a symbiotic and thoughtful consideration on behalf of the participants. For them, they are positively reinforced in their comfort and abilities when the clients are comfortable and positive. Harried and Angela talk more about this as follows:

Harriet: I feel pretty comfortable doing that. You know, in some discussions that I may have with clients, they may feel like they've been treated a certain kind of way. Well, want to know how you felt about it. I want to know the details about it. Tell me what the situation was.

Angela: You know I feel, I feel really comfortable. I talk about it in my personal life all the time. I will say with my clients that one of primary hesitations is not imposing my ideas onto them.
I found that participants were not only confident but seemingly ready to engage with their clients, despite having indicated that they knew very little about the construct or the theories that nurture the construct. The level of comfort in engaging with colleagues was different. As stated frankly by Monique, “I feel more comfortable talking about it with clients, than I do with colleagues.”

Navigating Challenges

Participants were aware of the fact that engaging with the construct would not be easy. Participants acknowledged their personal struggles in engaging with the construct of racism-based trauma. I also found that participants were aware of the challenge they would face from colleagues. Before providing some narratives from the participants, this awareness hints at potential pushback from colleagues. I find that engagement with the construct occurs more easily when there is some “collective nurturing.” This collectiveness also ensures that the construct is taken seriously. The racism-based trauma sensitivity of one practitioner may be completely upheaved if the entire collective within a practice setting does not believe in the construct. Participants believed that one way this upheaval could occur is being challenged for calling out whiteness.

Challenged while calling out whiteness.

In reflecting on whiteness, participants realized that they may be in the minority of people willing to call out the detrimental effects of whiteness. Frankly stated by Meghan, “A lot of white people are not going to want to hear that. Honestly, that's the biggest thing, White people don't like to be called out.” Specifically speaking on the
difficulty of calling out whiteness in a specific practice setting such as a courtroom,

Angela echoed Meghan’s statement in the following way:

Angela: In the court system, the one thing you probably can't say is “the reason supremacist, capitalist patriarchal system.” People don’t want to hear that. They're like, no, he made poor choices. And I think that sometimes it feels like you have to go around the elephant in the room. When like if people could really understand how anti-black and anti POC these systems and infrastructures are, that they were never made for us. If there was a real reckoning with that, I think a lot of these things would present differently.

In discussing the perpetuation of whiteness, participants acknowledged that doing so would take time. It is not in the interest of those in power to call out a system and it’s oppressive practices. If the tenant of structural determinism is applied to this theme, addressing whiteness in the manner and speed at which the participants would want to do it is not welcomed. The larger systems nurturing racism have no interest in relinquishing power or being wrong. Eliza and Rose make these points more salient in the following statements:

Eliza: I think that, like, one of the real challenges is figuring out how to, like, how to address racism when nobody wants to be called racist, you know? Plenty of people have been existing in these worlds for decades and decades. So, you know, I mean, I think that, like, I don't know, that people deserve a lot of hand holding around this. I think that in order to fully address a lot of the like racialized trauma and, and just racism generally, in the criminal justice system is going to take like, a very hard touch in a lot of ways.

Rose: Culture shifting takes a long fucking time. To build a career out of this job, negotiate longevity in this type of work, and security - with the need to constantly evolve your practice as the social and political climate changes is not a thing that comes easily. It is not an easy thing for people to talk about and to create an intervention process around.

**Questioning allies.**

In recognizing the important of challenging the construct of whiteness, participants were also critical of those whom proclaim to be allies. I found that there was
strength in simply critiquing and analyzing the agendas of others. Angela spoke passionately about this:

Angela: Sometimes spending time with white allies and hearing them speak about their commitment and actually be allies is a challenge. So not the like, “Oh, you know, my best friend is black so we're an ally.” But like people who legit are, white allies and do the work to maintain constant awareness. I'm like, "All right, you know, at least you know, Becky is really trying right now. I see her so I'm not in the struggle alone. We're not in the struggle alone." I would think that if you were interviewing white social workers - particularly white women, but white women social workers or even lighter complexion people of color because colorism is real – ask them what added steps in your own professional development do you do to aid in your allyship? Because I do think sometimes social workers come into the space and oftentimes, we come into the space and we assume because we want to do social work that we're down for the cause and we're allies. I think allyship is an ongoing intentional act and I find that, white, female social workers can be very fucking dangerous when they assume a level of complacency in their allyship. "I do this work and therefore I know what I'm talking about and I'm woke." They still hold a lot of power.

Angela’s comments regarding whiteness were not simply reserved for practitioners presenting as White. A true indicator of a mature racial identity is to think about race holistically and consider everyone capable of perpetuating whiteness. To that extent, Angela continued her narrative by declaring that a challenge lies within the client not believing in the construct despite presenting signs of being racially traumatized. Angela continues to speak:

Angela: You may not be at the level yet where you can hear or you can process right. Like, “wait, so this whole system is constructed against because of racism?” You might not hear that or you might, you might be on the other side of the spectrum. Not all skin folk are kin folk and some don't believe in that shit at all. They're like, “Nope, it's all about individual. Like, the sky's the limit, I could do it if I put my mind to it.” I'm like, “Fam, but it's just not how it works.” You know, they might say, "You know, so long as I have my Bible, I can do all things through Christ." And I was like, "No disrespect to the Bible. I love Jesus but there are like, real systems at play that has been shown to be oppressive.

In this discussion of being an ally and challenging those whom proclaim to be allies, participants seemed to wonder what an ideal match of races in the intervention dyad
would be. I found that participants, Monique in particular, reflected on the negative experiences they have had in having their encounter with racism downplayed by a non-person of color. She said the following:

Monique: I'm thinking one of the main challenges could be just who is who is taking the approach with the client? Um, I'm just like, thinking of times in my life, where people have tried to validate my experience with racial trauma, who are not people of color, and it has made me feel worse. It's been harmful. So, I guess I'm just wondering about like, if the race of the worker would play into the delivery of any kind of race-based trauma approach.

I understood and appreciated Monique’s thoughts. I also found that this thought undermines the importance for every practitioner to engage in racial identity development exploration. An engagement with the construct involving a “matching of the races” assumes that a client is automatically able to connect with a practitioner of the same race. This also allows those who do not believe in the construct, particular practitioners of a different race, to simply transfer the client to another practitioner. It is essentially taking the less difficult approach.

I find that in reflecting on narratives that the racism-based informed practitioner must realize that some consideration must be given to the amount of time one utilizes to explain the construct. Colleagues present a new obstacle in engaging with the construct and run the risk of blatantly dismissing the construct. If this occurs, the results are assumed to be potentially detrimental to the practitioner. I make mention of this to once again reiterate a healthy engagement with the construct involves the practitioner feeling nurtured, heard, and humanized. Harriet felt as though her colleagues “just don’t get it” and were oftentimes dismissive of the racism experienced by their clients. She said more below:
Harriet: Um, one of the most challenging things I would say is that sometimes people that are not of your same ethnic background, don't understand. I work with a lot of non-African American people and they don't get it. They never had the experience of being stopped for no reason, or questioned for no reason or you know, looked at a certain way because you’re dressed a certain way. You know, they just they don't have that and they don't understand. We may have a client that says, you know, “Hey, I was profiled, I wasn't doing nothing but driving.” Well, the first thing that a lot of my colleagues think is that, “Well, you must have been doing something wrong. You must have done something, or you wouldn't be here.

Angela also felt as though her colleagues were particularly clueless, that her racial identity was not acknowledged, and that her true story was not heard. She became visibly upset when reflecting on her experiences working in New York:

Angela: And I swear to you, the only difference between one of my clients and me is that I was into books in school. So, I think sometimes it becomes challenging in this space. It's like, sometimes the attorneys will say things about how sad our client’s lives are, how tragic or how awful and I'm like, “Damn if they knew my narrative of before I went to college. My backstory doesn't read much different from my clients.” And so I think sometimes there's that double consciousness of like, I'm part of this world. I have a sense of power in this office. And also I represent or I possess many of the characteristics that my clients do. The attorneys shutter and say “Oh, my goodness”, and I think race plays into that. You can't dismantle the master house using the master’s tools. I'm going to struggle with that because I sit in these courtrooms with predominantly white judges, white men, white AUSAs, white defense attorneys. We're getting better with diversity. But there is still not one black male trial attorney in my office. There is not one Latino male or female trial attorney in my office. And there are only two black women trial attorneys, everybody else is white. That’s uncomfortable, right? And I think like sitting in these spaces that were not built for people of color to occupy positions of power, like it's there every day. So often I often get asked when I come into the courtroom, "Are you a family member” or I’m told “I'm sorry, the guest entrance was around the corner” and I'm like, "I have the court ID in my hand.”

Angela and Harriet both allude to the importance of telling their story to their colleagues.

I found that in these reflections, even persons whom have engaged in elite and formal levels of training were still lacking in concepts critical to effective human service engagement. This engagement with colleagues and identifying whom is or not an ally is not restricted to those assisting on the legal team. I also found that it is important to
conceptualize the notion of what it truly means to be an ally. If one is an ally simply by working within the field and completing advocative roles as assigned, the conceptualization is done. If one is considered an ally by applying critical lenses to view an oppressive system and making note of the inequities prompted by policies and practices, that conceptualization is different. Where the participants fell in their allyship was not explored in depth. It was with Rachel’s comments on the experience of racism-based trauma by an incarcerated person that prompted the second conceptualization of being an ally. Rachel’s comments have been included to indicate how intricate and complex being an ally and advocate is in this larger construct:

Rachel: Um, you can't blame the fact that you got pulled over. Somebody who says, "Well, I got pulled over because I was black. And then I went to jail because I had drugs in my car." Well, hell, you got pulled over for a reason. I don't know if it was because you were black, but you needed to get pulled over because you had drugs and guns in your car. It also makes me upset when somebody comes to me and says, "Oh, you're Hispanic?" And I'm like, "No, I'm not. I'm black and white. I think that I personally, as a social worker, am in the middle and I've gotten that way, I think, because I'm able to see both sides because my boyfriend is a police officer. So I'm able to, and he's also able to show me things in a different light as far as I might have been looking at something a certain way before, you know, I was with him. I understand that there, there probably is a disparity but is there a reason behind that? Look at an unarmed person of color who was shot by a white cop or whatever. Okay, well, what about the unarmed white people who are being shot by white people or the unarmed white people who are being shot by black cops are the black cops who are shooting unarmed black people, you know, I'm saying. So it's like it's it's portrayed in a way that there is like a super serious race issue and I don't think its as big.

**Considering the Engagement to be Beneficial**

Identifying the challenges in engaging with the construct was assumed to be an emotionally draining process for the participants. To close the interview, participants were asked to reflect on some positive aspects in engaging with the construct of racism-based trauma in their work. The two resounding feelings that emerged from the question
were the ability to combat extralegal factors and having the ability to learn and diversify one’s practice approach.

**Combatting extralegal factors.**

Participants seemed to engage with racism-based trauma as an entry way into combatting other factors that affected the experiences of their clients. Participants recognized that there would be an increased level of awareness amongst all of the actor involved in the justice system. Engaging with racism-based stress was a pivotal starting point. For Eliza, this meant that participants had “a shot” at breaking down a number of barriers that affect them and that also negatively impact their experience. She said the following:

*Eliza: People have a shot to actually be treated well at the most basic level of humanity, you know? It means that, like, the criminal justice system wouldn't waste so much like time and energy and resources and to punish people for nothing other than, you know, their poverty and their race, right. Which is, like, so often the case.*

Combatting factors that negative effects of race and other demographic factors that negatively affect the client was also spoken on by Angela. I found that her thoughts on the beneficial aspects of engaging with the construct alluded to this act of awakening that the participants have alluded to. Angela’s

*Angela: Clients can help support themselves as they develop the language and awareness around their own possibility, and how they can navigate these spaces because I think those of us who are socially conscious and aware, we make different choices.*

Angela’s thoughts suggest that the client should be allowed to be his or biggest expert.

Participants, like Nasir, also mentioned that engaging with racism-based trauma prompts
prosecutor and judges to answer for their disparaging and oppressive actions. Nasir’s comments allude to the benefit of engaging with the construct in an empirical manner to back statistics with data through research and reflection.

Nasir: I think, when we start talking about racial trauma within the criminal justice system, I think we also need to focus on judges and prosecutors and looking at the stats. Look at a black male or female and a white male or female with some of the charges and the amount of time they get. Whether it's petty theft or whether it's murder, you look at the time given and it’s traumatizing in itself. Clients will say, “Well so and so got the same charge, why he get four years and they tried to give me 15?” I think we need to interview a judge and prosecutor. An interview with a prosecutor will be great and ask them same questions because either they don't notice, or they don't care. Um, so but I think it brings awareness and sometimes it maybe they just might not be socially conscious of what they're doing or why they're doing it.

Learning and diversifying practice.

Participant’s emotions were evoked during the interview process. Participants were also asked to speak on their level of understanding regarding a construct. Participants engaged in the interview while also inadvertently admitting that they lacked knowledge that is vital to their practice. Nevertheless, participants reinforced the “spirit of social work” by not letting a lack of knowledge negate them from learning more. For Monique, engaging with racism-based trauma not only aids the client. It also aids in “mitigating other forms of trauma” and enriches the concept of trauma, as a whole. Meghan felt as though engaging with the construct “is a really big opportunity.” Participants, after engaging in the interview, also took the approach of wanting to complete their own inquiries into the construct and its impact. Mia said the following:

Mia: There’s a lot that I want to add to my knowledge and my understanding. I think that what we are discussing is an issue, it's a revolving door. It's a huge issue. So, I think that I should be more in tune to it in regard to how to deal with these issues. I feel like I have work to do. That's how I feel. Honestly, I feel like not only from a client’s perspective or point of view, I would want the person
who is um, on the other end. So the person who, who is racially profiling or the person who is extending behavior that is, is causing trauma, I would want them to sit down and answer these questions as well.

Mia brought up a point that made me consider the impact of discussing the construct with those who believe or who are believed to perpetuate racism. This is a lofty idea but there may implications in how perpetrators of racism are taught about their actions through interviewing. I found that even the slightest engagement with the construct evoked some sort of participatory action. I also found that when engaging with the construct in a sensitive manner and avoiding hostility yields some strong narratives. This was helpful as discussing race can be difficulty and evocative. Another point of diversifying and improving practice came from Harriet and her focus on educating every person involved in the human service field. Harriet said the following:

Harriet: When you're dealing with people that may not have the same racial background as you, a lot of discussion is needed. One thing that probably offends me the most is when a non-African American person feels the need to want to fix us. We're not broken people. You know, disenfranchised people are not broken. We just may not have had the same benefits or the same opportunities as other people, but it doesn't mean that you are smarter. It just means you've had different opportunities.

In Harriet’s narrative, I find that there may be a prompting of racism-based trauma by treating clients as damaged. I also find that healthy engagement with the construct is very different from pandering to the client and massaging their experience. It appears as though treating a client as broken undermines the client’s resilience and power. Harriet’s narrative may also be coupled with Herman’s narrative in suggesting that the strength lies in simply prompting people to reevaluate their approach. He said the following:

Herman: Um, it starts it starts a conversation, that's the big thing. It makes colleagues, even people who really don't think about on a daily basis, really have to reevaluate themselves.
Summary of Section III

Participants expressed a willingness to and comfort in engaging with racism-based trauma with their clients. This willingness was present despite having limited knowledge and understanding of racial identity development. Participants also disclosed a number of challenges in engaging with the construct. Challenging the construct of whiteness was a challenge faced by the social workers in the work place and in the classroom. This idea of challenging whiteness also extended in engaging with clients and the possibility that they could perpetuate whiteness or be unwilling to engaging in talks about racism or racism-based stress. Of those challenges, the most salient challenge was engaging with colleagues. This finding indicated that one should be knowledgeable and aware of allies. The challenges, while significant, did not overshadow the fact that participants saw the benefits in engaging with the construct.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This conclusive chapter will include a final listing of the research questions and the answers for the questions will be included. Next the chapter describes a plan for the dissemination of findings of the study. After noting the limitations of the study it is noted that despite these limitations, the study is among the first to question how social workers engage with the construct of racism-based trauma in a carceral setting. The latter part of the chapter focuses on the implications of the findings for research and practice for the field of Social Work. Other implications for the study are as follows: theoretical implications, implications for research on racism trauma, practice that is informed by racism trauma, education on race and trauma, and training for practitioners working with those who experience racism. The chapter ends with a set of conclusions.

This study evaluated the role and experiences of social workers serving as advocates within a justice system or carceral setting. The study also maintained a focal point on racism-based trauma experienced by the incarcerated person. The study sought to answer the following research questions: How do justice system social workers define racism-based trauma? Do justice system social workers consider the incarceration experience to be one where racism-based stress occurs? To what extent do justice system social workers in a justice system setting engage with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad? What are the benefits and challenges to engaging with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad?

The goals for the proposed study were as follows: To identify how justice system social workers define racism-based trauma; to understand whether or not justice system
social workers consider the carceral experience to be racially traumatic; to inform practice approaches to racism-based trauma among justice system social workers.

**Research Questions**

**Question 1**

*How do justice system social workers define racism-based trauma?*

The construct of racial trauma, racism-based trauma, or race-based traumatic stress injury is a new and contributive construct. The construct is also one rooted in psychology and psychological evaluation, respectfully. Social workers, because of their expertise in advocacy, assessment, and practice under the NASW Code of Ethics, are believed to be able to contribute to the construct. This multidisciplinary consideration aids in legitimizing the construct, improving the definition, and accounts for any gaps in disciplinary differences.

Participants, with some thematic overlapped, conceptualized the construct as one that had potential to last over the course of the lifespan. Participants also considered the experience of racism-based trauma to be one that was often unbeknownst to the client. Clients were also assumed to be affected by racism-based trauma differently depending on what part of the country they lived in. The findings from how the social workers conceptualized racism-based trauma, aided in the following definition being developed:

An often unbeknownst and persistently stressful reaction to a covert or overt racially oppressive situation potentially accentuated by place or locale. The participant’s conceptualization and emerging definition suggest that they will explain the construct as one being heavily influenced by external factors. The participants definition also hints at the importance of not assigning any blame on the client for feeling what he or she is
feeling. The definition is nurturing to the client while not blatantly calling out a particular perpetrator of racism.

**Question 2**

*Do justice system social workers consider the incarceration experience to be one where racism-based stress occurs?*

The findings from the study indicated that social workers practicing in the justice system consider the incarceration experience to be traumatic. Participants unknowingly legitimized the notion that the incarceration experience was phasic, and that trauma occurs in each of those phases. The strength in these findings is apparent by social workers speaking on the racial oppression and inequities without being led to. Participants also considered the experience to be traumatic and a setting where racism-based trauma occurs without being led to.

Regarding the experience before incarceration, participants parsed out certain events as being highly stressful and tumultuous for their clients. Reflections on the stress of being overpoliced, sentenced in a disparaging manner based on race, being disregarded and talked to dismissively by one’s legal team, occurred. The actual experience of serving time in prison was equated to that of slavery and one that could only be survived by people of color, unfortunately. This notion was made while also declaring that the system was built for the subjugation of people of color. A compelling story of experiencing racism-based trauma after incarceration came when participants discussed racial discrimination experienced by their clients when seeking employment. Participants
also reported that their clients were disregarded by system actors and found life during reintegration so oppressive that many wanted to return to prison.

Surviving the experience for people of color was the key theme uncovered in this section of the study. Participants considered the incarceration experience to be one where racism-based trauma occurred. Moreover, participants considered the incarceration experience to one that was inescapable for their clients. To be released from prison was something that was often superficial for their clients. The justice system seemed to have a hold on a number of the participants clients and forced many to experience the omnipresence of being incarcerated. There was an overall notion of the body being free but the mind being trapped indefinitely. To this end, the incarceration experience overtly imprisons the justice system involved client but covertly imposes a number of sentences. The ends of justice for crimes seemed to be met while punishments for people of color were being grossly exceeded.

**Question 3**

*To what extent do justice system social workers in a justice system setting engage with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad?*

Participants welcomed the notion of assessing and responding to racism-based trauma experienced by the incarcerated person. This willingness to assess and respond seems to be ideal in spite of the participants not being knowledgeable of the construct. Nevertheless, the extent to which participants engage with racism-based trauma is minimal. The findings indicate that the participants are willing to engage in the future with consideration, validation, and meaningful trainings. As evidenced by the section, participants are also willing to engage in conversations about the construct. Participants
engaged with racism-based trauma at the most minimal level in practice and in education. Participants seemed to acknowledge that race impacted their client’s experience in the justice system. This was often done for the sake of the practitioner to make sure that they were being competent and sensitive. Racial disparities and trauma existing because of one’s experience with racism were not discussed with clients.

The study indicated that at best, justice system social workers engaged with the construct loosely. This loose engagement occurred in the actual study when participants were prompted to conceptualize the construct. Participants indicated that engagements in educational and training settings occurred under the guise of diversity, culture, and community. This became apparent throughout the interviews of the participants as the construct of race was often confused with constructs such as ethnicity, culture, community, and color. These constructs are all relevant to the work. These constructs also have nothing to do with the construct of race. Participants also lacked engagement with racial identity development processes. This became evident in their reports and how participants reflected on how they wished that they received more training in their respective social work programs of study.

**Question 4**

*What are the benefits and challenges to engaging with racism-based trauma in an intervention dyad?*

It was important to understand how social workers engaged with the construct to posit some practical approaches that could be applied. Themes that emerged from this section of the study were categorized into the interpersonal and intrapersonal aspects of engaging with the construct. The themes were categorized as such to report how
participants felt they could engage with the construct and how their colleagues would engage and nurture the construct. As mentioned, effective engagement with the construct is contingent on one’s mature racial identity development and feeling nurtured.

Participants were not expected to have a large amount of engagement with the construct. As a result, participants were expected to have certain strong emotions evoked. Some participants stated that they may have experienced the construct for themselves. Other participants questioned the legitimacy of the construct if all of their clients began reporting that they were experienced racism-based trauma. In all of these considerations, healthy self-reflections and healthy interactions with those in the practice settings are a benefit.

Participants’ identified benefits of engaging with the construct included having the opportunity to educate the client, to further their knowledge on a construct, and to make the conversation of race and trauma in the justice system more salient. The challenges outnumbered the benefits of the construct and were in regard to some hesitation and skepticism towards other colleagues. Through the narratives, it was discovered that not every social work colleague or justice system actor is an ally. Considering this to be a challenge was pivotal as the actual engagement with the construct amongst the clients can be difficult for the social worker. For instance, the participants indicated that to assess and respond the racism-based trauma effectively was to validate the experience. What the social worker does and feels after validating their client’s racism-based trauma but having theirs disregarded by a colleague is deflating and worth future consideration.
Implications

The implications that have arisen from this study are intended to be of a positive impact the advocacy work within the justice system and to the field of Social Work, as a whole. Implications from the study are anticipated to impact the following areas: theory, research, practice, education, and policy development.

Implications for theory.

The findings from the study affirm the fluidity and importance of developing one’s racial identity theory. Many participants embodied certain racial developmental stages throughout the study. While fluid in their developmental stages, participants indicted that it was possible to maneuver between processes. For those participants more mature in their racial development stages, there was more tact and consideration given to the construct of race. Participants were not easily shaken nor disrespectful when talking about race or racism. Participants in the early stages of racial identity development embodied the theory by becoming shaken, upset, and questionable of their worth and practice. A consideration for and an engagement with racial identity developments is advantageous. It is with this engagement and comfort with the theory that I thought about the need for racism-based trauma to be expanded to with types catering certain racial experiences. Regarding Critical Race Theory, participants were able to utilize the lens to critique a system that prompts racial subjugation and marginalization.

There is no evidence from this study to challenge the two theories. There is; however, a suggestion for the development of a theory that merges the tenants of the two theories. This comes from the grounded theory approach mentioned and from the coding done throughout the study. It seems fair to posit that one is able to engage in effective
critiques of race and its legal implications when one is secure in one’s identity development. If the racial identity is not concretized to some extent, the critique will be easily disputed. If the critique is disputed and not given any credence, what Critical Race Theory supports and calls for to impact change will not be achieved. To this end, I posit that a merging of the two theories is possible to provide an even greater holistic view into the issues of race and policy. Essentially, the suggested theory has tenants in racial identity development and critiquing the legal implications of race in America. This new theory, to which I will call Reflective Critical Race Theory, simply posits that one cannot fully engage in the critiquing of race without considering one’s racial identity and the importance of development. The theory prompts deeper level of reflection and is one assumed to be palatable to social workers whom are heavily influenced by taking steps to view phenomena. The theory is grounded in understanding oneself, to better understand others and the larger constructs.

**Implications for research.**

The knowledge generated from this dissertation is intended to influence how the social work practitioner, researcher, and scholar understands a specific trauma type and the impact that racism has on clients in highly stressful situations. Researchers, more specifically, are encouraged to consider how the social work practitioner assesses, responds, and treats racism-based trauma. This is worth considering and is owed to the client as assessing and identifying racism-based trauma may not fulfill intervention duties. It is important for future research to engage with the incarcerated person to take a more direct approach in assessing for racism-based trauma. This also aids in allowing the
actual victims of the trauma to disclose their stressors and furthers the notion that the incarcerated person experiences form of trauma other than PTSD.

Considering whether a delineation from racism-based trauma to colorism-based trauma is also plausible. Participants considered race to be an assignment based on physical appearance. One participant specifically mentioned how a lighter skinned client received a favorable sentence, in her opinion. Considering the effect of colorism on one’s emotional state intersects with racial, cultural, and community practices that have historically affected people of color. This research also aided in the conceptualization and operationalization of variables. With an overarching research question focusing on what affects recidivism, it became clear that race plays its part as a demographic variable. What will need to be explored in the future is whether or not race is a protective factor or one that poses risks for the incarcerated client. Lastly, it is suggested that the research regarding racism-based trauma, in any setting, be done qualitatively. Encounters with race involve sharing deep and dynamic stories. The qualitative method nurtures those stories and allows for reflection from any person engaging with the research. It is with that reflection that effective change may occur.

**Implications for practice.**

The practice implications for social worker extend into justice system work and into a plethora of other settings. The findings from this study are intended to prompt the social work practitioner to give greater consideration the racial experience of the client. The social worker is also encouraged to engage in a constant reflection of oneself and the privilege and lens prompted by their own race. Social work practitioners are held to a number of standards as outlined by the NASW Code of Ethics. The codes most salient to
this research and to social worker are Section 1.05 Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity, Section 2.10 Respect (National Association of Social Workers NASW, 2017). The sections call for the social worker to be sensitive to the categories. This study intended to move from the social worker simply memorizing the codes to thoughtfully engaging with them in practice. This will prompt the social worker to take greater time in the biopsychosocial assessment to ask thoughtful questions about one’s racialized experience. It is also anticipated that the social worker, particularly in a justice system setting, will educate the client on the construct to the best of their ability. This will aid in the client’s wellness, self-advocacy, and a deeper understanding of one’s own experience. It is of my belief that failing to thoughtfully consider the traumatic experiences of the incarcerated person communicates that the incarcerated person is not merited to experience major types of trauma.

**Implications for education and training.**

There are gaps regarding the education and training of social workers as it relates to racial difference. Participants were asked to reflect on their training and disclosed that race was often discussed gingerly and replaced with concepts such as diversity, culture, and community. In turn, some participants often confused race with culture and community. All of these concepts are different and require their own attention and level of understanding on behalf of the social worker. Participants were asked to provide the names of their social work programs and universities and the years that they graduated. This was not done to ridicule them or their respective programs. This was done to gain an understanding as to how deep into the constructs of race and racism schools were venturing. It turned out that the venturing was very surface level. Participants ranged
from having graduated over 10 years ago to having graduating 1 year ago. Participants also attended schools and universities around the country. Social work practitioners and educators are expected to depart from this study with an understanding that each construct deserves its own time and attention. Providing education on race, racism, and racial identity develops can only aid the social work practitioner in being more reflexive and not harming the client. This may also nurture a more inclusive classroom. There is also some onus placed on social work practitioners to invoke race and racism-based trauma awareness trainings in their practice setting. There should be a “streamline” of knowledge related to race and racism that moves from research, to the classroom, to the field.

**Implications for public policy.**

In considering the lack of engagement with race and racism-based trauma in an education setting, it is acknowledged that social work schools are often restricted in their teachings. To that end, the NASW Code of Ethics states that social workers either be trained in or practice under the following codes: Section 1.05 Cultural Awareness and Social Diversity, Section 2.10 Respect, Section 3.02 Education and Training, Section 4.02 Responsibility as Professionals regarding Discrimination (National Association of Social Workers NASW, 2017). This study, with respect to the Code of Ethics, posits that some alteration to the codes may be appropriate. Currently, education, training, and practice are widespread. Oftentimes, effectiveness in practice, education, and training comes from specificity. This specificity only arises when the guiding principles make it so. Some consideration should be given to specifically engaging with constructs that promote differences in lived experiences. One of those constructs is race, obviously. Not
maintaining specificity in policy also allows for a number of topics to either not be
discussed or guised under an umbrella of “diversity.”

This study may also impact policies in a number of agencies. If not in how social
workers practice, social workers may be mandated to participate in specific diversity
trainings. The intent of making trainings such as this mandatory is not to punish. It is
intended to inform and encourage more thoughtful practice.

Limitations

All studies have limitations, especially those that are addressing research
questions rarely posed or addressed in refereed publications, This study is no different
since a purposive sampling was used as a means in selecting research participants to
interview. Inclusion criteria were as follows: be between the ages of 21 and 70, hold a
baccalaureate, masters, or doctoral degree in Social Work and currently serve as an
advocate for clients and practice social work within a justice system setting. Even in
considering the inclusion criteria, the focus was on justice system actors and advocates
not involved in the prosecution or sentencing of a person. This sampling approach
assumed that all prosecutorial justice system actors and judges were not considerate of
racism-based trauma. While the literature regarding race, racism, disparities perpetuated
on the basis of race on behalf of judges and prosecutors is plentiful, the thoughts,
perceptions, and experiences of the justice system advocate may not be entirely
generalizable and sufficient to establish that a true divide between the two groups exists
(Abrams, Bertrand, & Mullainathan, 2012) (Whiting, 2009) (Fischman & Schanzenbach,
2012) (Steffensmeier & Demuth, Does Gender Modify the Effects of Race-Ethnicity on
Criminal Sanctioning? Sentences for Male and Female White, Black and Hispanic
Furthermore, it is entirely possible for justice system social workers to perpetuate racism, be insensitive to the racism-based trauma construct, and engage in the neuroticism and dismissive practices often utilized by defense attorneys and those assumed to be “helpers” (Elbers, van Wees, Akkermans, Cuijpers, & Bruinvelds, 2012) (Newman, 2018).

The perspectives from the social work practitioner on their views of racism-based trauma has rarely been explored, if at all. These practitioners were stakeholders whose narratives provide rich information to the construct of racism-based trauma experienced by the incarcerated person. While this study serves as a baseline study into understanding how and why social workers engage in the construct of racism-based trauma, the voices of those actually incarcerated was still neglected. It is because of this drawback that future investigations of and consideration of those people whom are and have been incarcerated will be vital.

This study is also limited as I had no clear rubric to use to measure participant’s competence regarding race and racial identity. Participants were simply asked how they engaged with the constructs of race and racial identity. Throughout the study, I relied solely on the participants’ expertise regarding a system affected by race, their recollections, and their own reporting. The consideration that participants’ level of confidence, lived experiences, upbringing, personal influences, self-esteem, and self-awareness could have influenced their perceptions. Future studies in which I engage with the construct and the personal views and experiences of social workers will be taken into consideration. Participants were also expected to remember accounts and experiences of their participants. It was premature on my behalf to assume that researchers would be
able to recall accounts with accuracy. A limitation prompted by myself also involves utilizing my skills as a researcher as the main tool of analysis for the narratives and data.

Despite these limitations, this study is still one of the first that the researcher is aware of that thoroughly consider how social workers conceptualize racism-based trauma. The utilization of the qualitative inquiry yielded thoughtful and helpful narratives that can aid in developing helpful practice approaches for the social worker. These limitations do not overshadow the benefit of allowing practitioners to share their narratives in an effort to improve Social Work practice and pedagogy. The results also introduce considerations to keep the social worker healthy and well when engaging in a polarizing social construct such as race. Furthermore, the study is taking a critical approach to an experience of racism amongst a marginalized group of people.

Information Dissemination Plan

The following are audiences for this research: justice system social workers, justice system advocates, those practicing in a justice system setting and those developing skills in an educational setting. Thus, the dissemination strategy will include composing and submitting for publication various articles and other forms of scholarship on assessing and treating racism-based trauma among the justice system involved person. The strategy will also include presenting the information at various conferences, university workshops and staff meetings of various agencies. The dissemination strategy will include presentation workshops where study findings will be shared with participating organizations and agencies that are community and justice based. Study findings will be presented in a relevant, easily digestible, and translatable way, and will also include working sessions with organization leaders and staff to critically think about
and develop plans for how they can use study findings to inform organization/agency policies, procedures, and/or services. The researcher will also create in collaboration with participating and interested organizations and universities, infographics of study findings linked to literature or marketing materials for their services or programs and resources on how their service populations can advocate for themselves around racism-based trauma. It will also be vital to share these findings with various schools of social work to have a colloquy on how social workers approach and feel about approaching racism-based trauma.

Finally, study findings will be disseminated through progress reports to funders and publications in peer-reviewed journal centered around social work practice, criminal justice, qualitative studies, and racial issues. The project dissemination plan along with a rich data and meaningful findings will effectively situate the research for future funding from private and public foundations.

**Conclusion**

In the United States of America, the incarceration experience is one that has historically subjugated persons of color. This experience has left those incarcerated susceptible to a plethora of laws and racist practices that evoke trauma and an acceptance that a large portion of life may be spent in an incarceration setting. For human service practitioners, specifically the social worker, there has been and continues to be a call to advocate for those engulfed in the incarceration experience.

Twelve social workers who have dedicated their work to advocate for the incarcerated person granted me the opportunity to hear their voices and tell their stories. These social workers were asked to speak on behalf of their clients about race, racism-
based trauma, and their social work expertise. Participants did so without even truly understanding some of the aforementioned constructs or with no answers to the questions asked. The experience was often uncomfortable but extremely insightful. Participants defined racism-based trauma, indicated that the incarceration experience is one where racism-based trauma occurs, detailed how helpful engagements with the construct may be done, and identified pivotal benefits and challenges in engaging with the construct.

Through critical theory and a qualitative inquiry, this exploratory research established a baseline for future research on the perceptions of social workers as it relates to the polarizing constructs of race and racism-based trauma. Based on the findings from the study, participants welcome the notion of assessing and responding to racism-based trauma experienced by the incarcerated person. This willingness to assess and respond seems to be an ideal embodiment of the NASW Code of Ethics. Critiques offered by the participants also indicate that the engagement with race and racism is a collective process requiring a revision to policies, practice, and how one reflects. There is time to make improvement on all fronts and one should take solace in knowing that the social work practitioner is capable of being a changemaker. The social work practitioner, educator, and researcher is encouraged to utilize this study to combat oppressive constructs that have cemented themselves in American society. Furthermore, the social work practitioner, educator, and researcher is encouraged to remember the value in checking oneself while checking on others. Clients such as Mr. Reed are dependent upon this reflection from all of those engaged in the field of Social Work.
APPENDIX A

Interview Guide

Professional Experience

1. What is your title and how did you come into this line of work?

2. Have you worked with clients belonging to visibly different racial groups?

3. Would you consider yourself to be an advocate for persons involved in the justice system? If so, say more.

4. Tell me about a successful experience in your line of work.

5. What are some challenges that you have identified in your work?

The Incarceration Experience

1. What comes to mind when thinking about the experiences of someone involved in the justice system?

2. Where in the justice system process do you target your advocacy services?

3. In your best explanation and as it relates to the justice system, what do you think occurs before and after a client comes into contact with you?

4. Based on that explanation, would you consider what occurs to be physically and emotionally stressful for the client?

5. Have there been any racial disparities noticed or read by you in your work within the justice system?
Engaging with Race and Racism-Based Trauma

The Extent of Engagement

1. In what ways have you been trained or read scholarship regarding taking a trauma-informed approach in your practice?
2. In what ways have you taken a trauma informed approach in your work?
3. In what ways have you engaged with the construct of racial trauma, racism-based trauma or race based traumatic stress injury? (sensitive question because no may be a reflection on personal skills or inadequacies)
4. How you would you explain the construct of racism-based trauma to a colleague or your client?
5. In what ways have you been trained or read scholarship on the processes of racial identity development or racism-based trauma?
6. What have clients disclosed to you, if anything, about their racialized experience while being a justice system involved person?

The Benefits and Challenges of Engagement

1. How comfortable do you feel discussing experiences of racial discrimination, racial harassment, racial oppression experienced by a client?
2. Can you walk me through how you would both assess for and respond to stress prompted by a client experiencing racism-based stress or injury?
3. What benefits or challenges come with taking this approach in the intervention dyad?
Closing

1. What university and what year did you or do you anticipate graduating?

2. Regarding race and gender, how do you identify?

3. Is there something that I did not ask that you would like to add?
Dear _____,

My name is Curtis Davis and I am a doctoral candidate in Tulane University’s Social Work (City, Culture, and Community) Program. You are being contacted to gauge your interest and to gain your participation in an hour-long, video interview for research. With your participation in the study, I aim to understand how social workers working within the American justice system engage with the construct of race and racism experienced by their clients of color within a carceral setting.

Participation in this study is completely voluntary and upon agreement of participation, you will be provided with a full description of the research purpose, personnel, procedures, risks, benefits, and a reiteration that your participation is completely voluntary. By expressing interest in participating in the study, you will be read a consent form that details more information of the study and allows you to provide consent. You are free and able to withdraw from the study at any point. Should you be interested in participating in this interview, please respond to this email with a confirmation of participation and available dates and times to meet. You can also contact Dr. Charles Figley as he serves as my faculty advisor and investigator for the study. He can be reached at figley@tulane.edu or (504) 862-3473.

Best,

Curtis Davis

Curtis Davis, Jr., LMSW
Doctoral Candidate
Social Work (City, Culture, and Community)
Graduate Assistant (The Office of Multicultural Affairs)
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New Orleans, LA 70112-2627
(504) 908-2005
https://ccc.tulane.edu/content/curtis-davis
APPENDIX C

IRB Determination Letters

DATE: March 29, 2019
TO: Curtis Davis
FROM: Tulane University Social-Behavioral IRB
STUDY TITLE: Exploring Racism Experienced by the Incarcerated Person
REF #: 2018-2328
SUBMISSION TYPE: Initial Submission
ACTION: APPROVED

On February 27, 2019, the Tulane University Social-Behavioral IRB made a determination of Conditions Required for Approval for the initial submission of this minimal risk study in accordance with the appropriate research regulations.

On March 20, 2019, the Tulane Investigator's response, along with the revised and requested study documents provided, were reviewed and it was determined that the stipulations have been met.

The following items were submitted as part of the submission:

- AcceptedChangesConsentScriptV2 (Consent Script)
- AcceptedChangesEmailScriptVersion2 (Recruitment Letter)
- AcceptedChangesPhoneScriptVersion2 (Telephone Recruitment Script)
- AcceptedChangesProtocolUpdatedVersion2 (Study Protocol)
- AcceptedInterviewQuestions (Interview Script)
- CITI Training (Training Certificate)
- CITI Training (Training Certificate)
- citiCompletionReport1164850-1.pdf (IRBNet Document)
- TrackedChangesConsentScriptV2 (Consent Script)
- TrackedChangesEmailScriptVersion2 (Recruitment Letter)
- TrackedChangesPhoneScriptVersion2 (Telephone Recruitment Script)
This study is approved for the local enrollment of 20 subjects.

The IRB grants a waiver for written documentation of consent in accordance with 45 CFR 46.117(c)(1).

This study is granted an approval period of March 20, 2019 – March 19, 2020.

The Tulane University IRB approved informed consent form must be used when enrolling subjects.

The IRB based this approval is based on an appropriate risk/benefit ratio and a study design where the risks have been minimized. All research must be conducted in accordance with this approved submission.

Please submit any proposed changes to the research study, including enrollment of additional study participants, to the IRB for review and approval prior to implementation, unless a change is necessary to avoid immediate harm to subjects. If subject safety becomes an issue, please notify the HRPO as soon as possible.

The informed consent process begins with a description of the study and assurance of participant understanding followed by a signed consent form. Informed consent must continue throughout the study with dialogue between the Investigator and research participant. Federal regulations require each participant to receive a copy of their signed consent form unless the IRB waives this requirement.

Please submit any unanticipated problems involving risk to subjects or others, deviations from the approved research, non-compliance, and complaints to the IRB in accordance with Tulane HRPP policies and procedures. In addition, please also submit any reports generated by the DSMB or oversight committee to the IRB, if required.

Pursuant to Tulane University's Human Research Protection Program Standard Operation Procedures, a study progress report will be required annually.

Please notify the IRB within 30 days of completion of all study activities and data analysis by submitting a Study Closure Form.

Please do not hesitate to contact our office with any questions or concerns.

Sincerely,

Tulane University Human Research Protection Office

Please note that the actual signature by the IRB Chair(s) is not required for this document to be effective. IRBManger generates this letter pursuant to the IRB Chair's electronic signature and approval. This process is consistent with Federal Regulations and Tulane Standard Operating Policies with respect to the IRB and Human Research Protection Office, which consider electronically generated documents as official notices to sponsors and others of approval, disapproval or other IRB decisions. Please refer to Tulane's Electronic Signatures and Records Policy by visiting the HRPO website at https://research.tulane.edu/hrpo.
## APPENDIX D

### Themes and Codes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Categories</th>
<th>Themes</th>
<th>Sub-Themes</th>
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| **Conceptualizing Racism-Based Trauma** | Racialized and Traumatic Incarceration Experience | 1. Considering the Entire System as Racist  
2. Experiencing Racism by the Police  
3. Disparagingly Receiving Clinical Treatment  
4. Navigating and Unforgiveable and Broken System  
5. Experiencing Stress Prior to Incarceration  
6. Experiencing Stress During Incarceration  
7. Experiencing Stress After Incarceration |
|                                     | Defining Racism-Based Trauma                | 1. Unknowingly Experienced Racism-Based Trauma  
2. An Enduring Experience  
3. Accentuating Racism-Based Trauma Based on Location |
| **The Extent of Intervventional Engagement** | The Dichotomization of the Construct        | 1. A Black and White Experience  
2. Whiteness as the Perpetrator |
|                                     | Minimally Engaging with the Construct       | 1. Lacking education and training  
2. Confusing Race with Another Construct |
| **Interpersonal and Intrapersonal Engagements** | Assessing and Responding with Consideration | 1. Acknowledging and Validating  
2. Educating the Client  
3. Going Rogue |
|                                     | Unfamiliarity with Racial Identity Development | 1. Lacking education and training  
2. Race confused with another social construct |
|                                     | Maintaining Comfort                         | 1. Challenged while calling out whiteness  
2. Questioning allies |
|                                     | Navigating Challenges                       | 1. Combatting extralegal factors  
2. Learning and diversifying practice |
List of References


Biography

Curtis Davis holds a Bachelor of Social Work from the University of Mississippi and a Master of Social Work from the University of Alabama. Along with experience and specialization in the forensic social work field, he utilizes mixed method approaches to aid in social justice program evaluations and development. More specifically, his work examines how the intersections of race, gender, and other demographic variables may impact the living experience of people of color. In addition to contributing to the knowledge base of forensic social work practice, it is Curtis’ hope that he will be able to understand, develop, and influence programs that assist in effective reintegration and lower recidivism rates for adjudicated youth and adults. Curtis is also passionate about the holistic and meaningful training of burgeoning and seasoned social work practitioners.