Skin Color: Influences on African American Adolescents’ Self-Image

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- Skin color has historically played a significant role for African Americans. We will provide accounts of how skin color perceptions have impacted African Americans over time. Implications for educational research and practice are discussed.

Skin Color: Influences on Self-Image
Merriam-Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary (1996) defines the terms white and black, respectively, “free from moral impurity....innocent....fortunate....passionate” (p.1348), and, in stark contrast, “dirty, soiled....wicked....very sad, gloomy....sullen” (p. 118). Considering the images evoked at such definitions, it is likely that bearing one label is more socially advantageous than the other. Likewise, being White in the U.S. has, historically, unequivocally provided social advantages that being Black has not.

Light-skinned African Americans, as compared to their darker skinned counterparts, have been afforded certain benefits because of skin color. Venturing back to the period of slavery, lighter skinned Blacks and those with Caucasian attributes, were often more highly valued. Skin color determined one slave’s workload from another’s (Frazier, 1957), and lighter slaves came to recognize their superiority over darker slaves (Akbar, 1987). Light skin and Caucasian features served as evidence of White lineage, thus allowing lighter skinned Blacks to be considered genetically superior to darker skinned Blacks (Hall, 1995; Poussaint, 1975). In fact, as Warner, Junker, and Adams (1941) discuss, it was uncommon to find light skinned women in the lower class of society.

African Americans in closer proximity to the White standard of appearance have continued to be more accepted by the majority society (Neal & Wilson, 1989; Poussaint, 1975), more revered within their own communities (Hall, 1995), and likely to value their Whiteness (Williamson, 1971). Unfortunately, this prized acceptance has become a virtue that other African Americans feel pressured to attain, and has fed into intraracial prejudice as a result.

Considering the timeless adage common in many African American communities “if you are light you are all right, if you are Black stay back,” there is little wonder that skin color is such a loaded issue among African Americans. Messages such as these, not quite as outdated as African Americans might prefer them to be, may become internalized by individuals and communities alike (Bates, 1994; Harvey, 1995).

The Problem of Skin Color
There is no other feature quite as salient among Black persons as their actual skin color (Hall, 1995). Historically, lighter skinned African Americans have been afforded better socioeconomic statuses (Hill, 2000; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Neal & Wilson, 1989), enjoyed more political dominance (“Why Skin Color,” 1992), and been awarded greater educational opportunities (Reuter, 1917) than darker skinned African Americans. In a study conducted just thirty years ago, Edwards (1973) found that among Black urbanites, the number of light skinned Blacks having attended college was double that of darker skinned Blacks. Lighter skinned Blacks also had a higher incomes, more White-collar occupations, and likely to have a father who also went to college. In a later study, Seltzer and Smith (1991) found that darker-skinned Blacks surveyed more likely to have dropped out of high school, have less prestigious occupations, and earn below-average family incomes. Still more recently, Hill (2000) found, among a longitudinal study of southern-reared African American men, that
those identified as “Mulatto” experienced moderately higher socioeconomic statuses than did their “Black” counterparts. It appears that these factors may remain constant, considering Hall’s (1996) study of African American college students found that light skin Blacks aspire towards more prestigious occupations than their dark-skinned peers.

Hall (1995) speaks to skin color as being the one thing distinguishing those in the minority from those in the majority. The universal respect commanded by lighter skin is reflected in various other communities as well, such as South American, Asian (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992), Arab American (Jackson & Nassar-McMillan, 2005), and Puerto Rican cultures (Alarcon, Szalacha, Erkut, Fields, & Coll, 2000). Although the phenomenon of class stratification by skin color has shifted somewhat over recent generations, intraracial discrimination is still prevalent (Smith & Seltzer, 1991). Skin color and its impact seem to persist with relatively little change (Hughes & Hertel, 1990).

Relative to gender, the importance of skin color does not appear to be more important for females than for males, and age appears to play a role in how skin color perceptions are internalized. Among African American female adults, the desire to be lighter clearly exists (Grier & Cobb, 1968; Bond & Cash, 1992; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992). For males, on the other hand, “power is more potent than pigment” (Bates, 1994, p.80). Black men have historically been the pursuer of the lighter woman, while the woman accepted the man regardless of skin color. This imbalance has allowed African American men to focus on issues of a higher caliber, such as power and prestige.

While a small body of the research conducted on skin color has focused on adults, less research with African American adolescents has been conducted on any topic (McKenry, Everett, Ramseur & Carter, 1989), especially skin color. The affinity for lighter skin, however, has been borne out in some research, and seems to extend to adolescents as well (Anderson & Cromwell, 1977; Robinson & Ward, 1995).

**Conclusions and Implications**

The preference not to be at either end of the skin color continuum appears as a resounding reality (Bates, 1994), with a leaning toward the lighter end of the continuum (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hall, 1995; Harvey, 1995; Robinson & Ward, 1995). Research has shown the preference to exist for both genders, although females tend to be rated more favorably when their skin is lighter (Bond & Cash, 1992; Robinson & Ward, 1995).

Given this propensity towards lightness, the dark complected African American female may be faced with a reality she cannot alter. In fact, Boyd (1993) speaks to the “if only” (p. 41) dance that women play. This evokes the question of how many African-American adolescent females have danced this dance, asking themselves how different life could be if only they were lighter, or for some, if they were darker.

The impact of skin color continues to play a major role in African American adolescent females' perceptions of selves and others (Comaz-Diaz & Greene, 1994). More males need to be studied, as well. Further, similar struggles have been fought by other racial and other ethnic groups historically, and to examine the historical status of skin color among various groups would serve to broaden the context and enhance larger-scale education and interventions. Finally, Whites should be studied, as the majority population in American society. Understanding their perceptions over time would help to advance such interventions, as oppressors must be key players in overcoming their potentially subconscious stereotyping.

It is important to note that, despite the findings illuminated here, generalizations should not be made to all African American individuals or to peoples of other races and ethnicities. On the other hand, it is critical for all educators, particularly White educators, to be aware that the topic of skin color could pose emotionally laden issues for students of color. Educators should be sensitive to the issue, and initiate discussion of it as appropriate, rather than to shy away from it. Along those lines, it is important for White educators to be aware that, if only due to being closer to the White “standard” approximation of beauty, that they may inherently be "privileged" by being White.

Black, or other educators of Color, should be particularly aware of not making generalizations to all students or clients. Personally unresolved skin color issues could impact the assessment of a situation, causing transference or countertransference to occur, which would be counterproductive both to individuals and those they serve. Caveats include being aware of such personal skin color issues, as well as acknowledging that even if students may have similar issues, they will undoubtedly be influenced by age, generational cohorts, racial identity, or even geographic region.
Contemporary adolescents seem to be more content with themselves in terms of such characteristics despite the stereotypes based on skin color among the mainstream American culture. As responsive educators, we must give careful thought to how to reinforce positive perceptions, while continuing to work toward eradicating further negative ones.

References


Why skin color suddenly is a big issue again. (1992, March). *Ebony, 47*(5), 120-122.