

Bias Among African-Americans Regarding Skin Color: Implications for Social Work Practice

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It is often assumed that skin color bias occurs primarily among Whites and is directed against Blacks. The present study was undertaken to determine whether or not African-Americans themselves experience a skin color bias directed against fellow African-Americans. Using a sample of African-American college students, it was found that these students evaluated darker skin color in a negative manner and viewed lighter skin tones as more desirable. The apparent pervasiveness of a bias against persons with darker complexions adhered to by both White and Blacks suggests that this issue should be addressed within social work education and practice.

In March 1990 the Federal District Court of Atlanta heard the case of *Morrow v. the Internal Revenue Service* (1990). Tracey Morrow, the plaintiff, alleged that her supervisor discriminated against her on the basis of skin color (Hiskey, 1990). What makes this case a landmark is that both the plaintiff and her supervisor are African-Americans. The plaintiff is light-skinned, whereas the defendant, by comparison, is dark. Although she lost in the district court, Ms. Morrow has filed an appeal and is scheduled to appear in appellate court. Aside from the legal ramifications, this case focuses attention on a critical issue seldom addressed in social work education or research on practice, that is, the existence of skin color bias among African-Americans. That there has been a case in federal court with skin color bias as its central focus should direct social workers to reconsider the contemporary impact of skin color bias on both clients and practitioners.

According to James Baldwin, the root of African-American difficulty is directly related to skin color (cf. B. F. Jones, 1966). Skin color may have an effect on every phase of an African-American's life, including job placement, earnings, and self-concept (Vontress, 1970). A well-known phenomenon among members of a minority group is a rejection of their group membership

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(Levine & Padilla, 1980). For African-Americans and others, this can be manifested by adopting the beauty standards of the dominant group (i.e., Whites) and valuing these same dominant group characteristics with respect to one another. Many contemporary examples of this phenomenon can be found, such as Willie Horton's role in the 1988 presidential campaign (Schram, 1990) and a Boston incident in which an African-American male was accused of murdering a White woman (Carlson, 1990). These instances illustrate the continuing problem of skin color bias for African-American males. Problems for African-American women related to skin color involve its implications for physical beauty. For example, Black women with more Caucasian features continue to be valued more highly (cf. Neal & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey, Robinson, & Ward, 1987).

Because the majority of Americans have been of European descent, light skin color became the ideal (Myrdal, 1944). However, for African-Americans such ideals can be damaging to one's self-concept, given the circumstances of miscegenation during the slave era (Fanon, 1965). Early on, the miscegenated offspring of the group held a privileged status in the community (Klineberg, 1944). Wealth, poise, and overall appeal came to be associated with light skin (Reuter, 1969). This assumption is even evident in the historical public exchanges between African-American leaders. In an editorial of the *Crisis*, an Atlanta University journal, W.E.B. Du Bois, a light-skinned African-American, labeled Marcus Garvey "fat, black, and ugly," implying that African features were not attractive (cf. Franklin & Meier, 1982). This was not a singular incident. A high-ranking official of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People used similar terminology, referring to Garvey as a "Jamaican Negro of unmixed stock," implying that pronounced African features were hardly the ideal (cf. Garvey, 1986).

The association of light skin with status and thus attractiveness meant that skin color became a vehicle for bias among African-Americans, even though light skin was less common than dark (Huggins, 1942). Value-laden terms evolved that reflected bias, such as *high-yellow*, *ginger*, *cream-colored*, and *bronze* (Herskovits, 1968). Similar bias was associated with other features, such as hair, which was designated *bad* if it was the kinky African type and *good* if it was the straight Caucasian type. When the term *Black* was used, it more often than not preceded something derogatory (Hall, 1990a).

Shortly after "Negro Suffrage" and the Garvey era, overt verbal hostilities regarding skin color largely subsided. The implicit bias, however, remained intact and actually became more accepted over time (Rose, 1964). On the college campus, it was almost impossible for a dark-skinned student to join a fraternity. Various social events required the "brown-paper-bag test" as a

condition of admission. Those persons darker than a brown paper bag were assessed a fee before they could be admitted; those lighter were admitted free (cf. Hall, 1990a).

Perhaps the most telling features of the bias of dominant group ideals were the beauty standards applied to African-American females. Regardless of character or intelligence, campus queens were always selected from among those with light skin and, preferably, long naturally straight hair. The more affluent of the male population sought out such females almost exclusively for marriage (Rabinowitz, 1978). The result was a kind of sexual jealousy between dark-skinned African-American females and their light-skinned counterparts. When out with her date, a dark-skinned woman would often go to great lengths to see that nothing transpired between her man and a more "attractive" (i.e., light-skinned woman; Hernton, 1965). That this is a reality for females and not males may be due in part to the sexism of society.

The rhetoric of the 1960s espoused new ideals in the African-American community (R. L. Jones, 1980). Kinky hair and dark features were heralded as desirable on the campus and in marriage. In retrospect, however, what was practiced did not always coincide with what was espoused. Dark-skinned African-Americans could join fraternities, and dark-skinned campus queens became commonplace, but there did not appear to be any real emotional investment in the choice. Still, the personal bias regarding skin color was seldom discussed publicly.

The existence of a skin color bias is not limited to America. An Israeli study involving newly arrived Ethiopian Jews conducted by Henik, Munitz, and Priel (1985) corroborated the universality of bias toward light-skin, and in India contemporary researchers found continuing evidence of mating choices based on skin color (Banerjee, 1985). Similar biases are even displayed among children from such disparate origins as Canada, England, Ghana, and Jamaica (Bagley & Young, 1988).

In the United States, African-American women are particularly aware of the impact that skin color may have on their opportunities in life. According to Neal and Wilson (1989), skin color has a different psychological effect on women because physical appearance is more important in their lives than that of men. In a study involving the politics of skin color, Okazawa-Rey et al. (1987) found that the depictions of African-American women in romance novels often are of Black women with White features. In fact, such women were often depicted as a White extreme. Sciarra (1983) had earlier found that first-year college students devalued persons on the basis of dark skin. A rank ordering of mean scores indicated a strong pattern of negative appraisal of

African-American males who had darker skin, whereas the most highly valued group was the White female.

In marriage, affluent African-Americans, although they may not admit it publicly, continue to show an aversion to dark-skinned mates in their choice of partners (Hernton, 1965). The light-skinned ethnic "firsts" — such as Miss America; Douglas Wilder, the governor of Virginia; and others — continue to dominate whenever physical appearance is a factor in the selection process (Hertel & Hughes, 1988). This relationship of skin color to the selection process was evident during the antebellum period when light-skinned African-Americans were chosen to be trained as house servants and skilled artisans (Lerner, 1972). It was evident following "Negro Suffrage," when W.E.B. Du Bois called on the "talented tenth," who were most often light-skinned, to lead the race (cited in Reuter, 1934). And it continues to be a fact no less today, according to Hertel and Hughes (1988), who recently found that light-skinned African-Americans are selected for jobs that allow them to earn significantly more than dark-skinned African-Americans. The preceding series of prior findings led to the conduct of the following study, intended to answer the research question: What is the current bias, if any, imposed by African-Americans regarding skin color on themselves?

METHOD AND PROCEDURES

Sample

The sample for this study consisted of 83 African-American first-year college students attending a historically Black college located in south Georgia during the 1988-1989 school year who were randomly selected from the registrar's roster. The sample consisted of 33 men and 50 women and had a mean age of 18 years ($SD = 0.88$). All participants were attending college full-time and were classified as regularly admitted students.

Measures

A self-report instrument called the Cutaneo-Chromo-Correlate (CCC) was developed by the author to assess potential skin bias (a complete copy of the CCC is available from the author). Part B of the CCC assesses the respondent's ideals pertaining to skin color (see Table 1). In scoring a student's responses to the CCC, a rating of *lightest* was coded as a 5, *light* as a 4, *medium* as a 3, *dark* as a 2, and *darkest* as a 1. In Part C of the CCC, students provided self-ratings of their own skin color using this same cate-

TABLE 1: Part B of the Cutaneo-Chromo-Correlate Instrument

<i>Lightest</i> (A)	<i>Light</i> (B)	<i>Medium</i> (C)	<i>Dark</i> (D)	<i>Darkest</i> (E)
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Directions: Section B consists of 15 items to collect data on selected personal values. Using the codes above, express your preference about Black Americans by blackening in the answer sheet the response that best describes your opinion. Remember to record your response on the answer sheet.

1. Pretty skin is _____.
2. The skin color of pretty women is _____.
3. The skin color of the man women like is _____.
4. I wish my skin color were _____.
5. The skin color of smart Blacks is _____.
6. The skin color of Blacks who are snobs is _____.
7. The skin color of Blacks who are kind is _____.
8. The skin color of my best friend is _____.
9. I want my child(ren)'s skin color to be _____.
10. My ideal spouse's skin color is _____.
11. The skin color of my family should be _____.
12. The skin color of my race (Black) should be _____.
13. The skin color of Blacks who are physically strong is _____.
14. The skin color of Blacks who are dumb is _____.
15. The ideal skin color of my child(ren)'s spouse is _____.

gorical scheme (lightest, light, medium, dark, darkest). These self-ratings of one's own skin color served as the independent variable of this study, whereas the ratings for Part B pertaining to one's values concerning skin color served as the dependent measure. The entire CCC was pilot tested (see Hall, 1990b) prior to use in this study.

Research Design

The respondents were divided into two groups based on their reported skin color, lighter or darker. Those rating themselves as lightest or lighter composed the lighter group ($n = 57$), whereas those providing self-ratings of dark or darkest composed the darker group ($n = 26$). Those rating themselves as medium were not analyzed in this study. The numerical values of the five possible responses of the CCC (see Table 1) were used to come up with an average score for each respondent pertaining to skin color bias, with higher scores reflective of a greater valuing of lighter skin and a devaluing of darker skin. Lower scores reflect a greater valuing of darker skin and a devaluing of lighter skin.

RESULTS

The mean score (and standard deviation) for Part B of the CCC obtained from the light-skinned students was 3.27 ($SD = 0.84$). The corresponding figures obtained from the dark-skinned students was 2.58 ($SD = 0.86$). Using a t test, the difference in mean scores between the two groups is statistically significant ($t[82] = 1.00$; $p < .05$). Apparently, light-skinned African-American college students value lighter skin tones more highly, relative to dark-skinned students.

DISCUSSION AND APPLICATIONS TO SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

According to these data, there is a significant relationship between a person's actual skin color and one's idealized skin color. In a culture in which light skin has been portrayed as the ideal, the scores of light-skinned persons may indeed reflect a source of bias against dark-skinned African-Americans. The answers of the dark-skinned respondents may reflect the response of dark-skinned African-Americans to light-skinned ideals. What this suggests is that not only light-skinned African-Americans but dark-skinned African-Americans as well harbor ideals that allow for the imposition of bias on members of their own racial group.

African-Americans with a medium skin color are less stigmatized than are light- and dark-skinned African-Americans. They have the ability to move more freely within the ethnic group and are thus less victimized (Hall, 1990). Additionally, their larger numbers within the African-American population make medium skin color less susceptible to the bias of the smaller color subcategories.

That skin color is a source of bias among African-Americans has implications for social work practice. Ideals may affect self-esteem and self-concept, which are two of the most basic elements of mental health. Social problems such as teen pregnancy, generational welfare, and drug abuse may indeed be symptoms of a more deeply rooted inability to resolve skin color issues in a color-biased society. What is more, a great deal of minority content to date has focused on helping European-American students become aware of their latent biases in working with African-American clients. The present data suggest the importance of African-American students' being equally sensitive to the potential for bias in working with other African-Americans. Social work educators may begin by adding skin color issues to the curriculum.

The issue of skin color bias also has implications for private practice. Quite apart from possible racial bias on the part of European-American social workers, it is also apparent that light-skinned African-American human service professionals may be more highly sought after as therapists by Black clients. Also, these same African-American social workers may be subtly biased against working with darker-skinned Black clients.

The present exploratory study at best suggests areas for future research, education, and training in practice skills for both social work students and existing professionals. Hitherto unexplored in the field of social work, skin color bias among African-Americans is a serious psychosocial phenomenon worthy of future attention from our profession.

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