

Consequences of Skin Tone Bias for African Americans: Resource Attainment and Psychological/Social Functioning

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In the early half of this century, a popular saying captured prevalent notions about the importance of skin tone for Black people in the United States. “If you’re white, you’re all right; if you’re yellow, you’re mellow; if you’re brown, stick around; if you’re black, get back.” This rhyme illustrated the progressive devaluation associated with African Americans as skin tone became darker and further from the White ideal. In the 1950’s and 1960’s, social activism to end segregation and improve the quality of life for African Americans provided the impetus to reduce divisions based on skin tone. People began to proclaim that “Black is beautiful” and express greater pride in being Black.

Through these different periods, researchers have investigated various ways in which skin tone may affect African Americans. Their studies reveal instances of bias against Black people of different skin tones, particularly by Whites and fellow African Americans. Though the preponderance of this literature presents findings that suggest light-skinned Blacks accrue benefits and dark-skinned African Americans experience costs due to skin tone bias, I urge the reader to be mindful that empirical research has not yet been conducted to investigate the drawbacks of light skin and the gains of dark skin for African Americans. Given this limitation, important insights can still be gained by surveying the literature. Two general areas of study, one focusing on the ways in which skin tone bias may be expressed and the other emphasizing the outcomes resulting from bias, have emerged in the literature. The majority of this paper will focus on outcomes, but first I will briefly address the ways in which skin tone bias may manifest.

Skin tone bias may be expressed as a general, affect-driven preference or dislike for

African Americans with specific skin tones or as stereotypes about individuals possessing light or dark skin. Specific preferences and dislikes have been found in Black children (Seeman, 1946; Porter, 1991), adolescents (Goering, 1971; Robinson & Ward, 1995), and adults (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hall, 1992). The general trend is a preference for light African Americans and dislike for dark individuals, though judgments may be shaped by the individual's own skin tone (Bond & Cash, 1992; Hall, 1992). Individuals justifying their judgments (Seeman, 1946; Robinson & Ward, 1995) or attributing characteristics based upon skin tone (Marks, 1943; Anderson & Cromwell, 1977) reveal numerous positive stereotypes favoring light-skinned individuals. Among other qualities, light African Americans are seen as intelligent, clean, and nice. Negative characteristics (i.e., dumb and dirty) are generally reserved for dark African Americans.

These two aspects of skin tone bias, preference/dislike and stereotypes, are key elements in a process leading to different socio-economic and psychological outcomes for Black people in the United States. These outcomes span a wide variety of phenomena, including mate selection (Bond & Cash, 1992; Porter, 1991; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Udry et al., 1969; Freeman et al., 1966; Drake & Cayton, 1945) and racial identity (Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Edwards, 1973; Ransford, 1970; Freeman et al., 1966). My focus will be on resource attainment (i.e., income, education, and occupational status or prestige) and psychological/social functioning.

Outcomes of Skin Tone Bias

Resource Attainment

Successively, larger populations have been sampled to describe the influence of skin tone bias on resource attainment. Using a sample of 312 Black male heads of household in the Los Angeles area, Ransford (1970) found that for men with less than a high school education or some

college, skin tone did not significantly influence the distribution in three income categories (below or at poverty, low and middle income). The distribution of men graduating from high school without any college experience, however, was significantly influenced by skin tone, such that light respondents were overrepresented in the highest income category. He also found that for individuals with less than a high school education or some college, skin tone significantly influenced the distribution of those in blue- or white-collar jobs or unemployed. Dark African Americans were almost three times more likely to be unemployed than their lighter counterparts.

Utilizing a larger, more representative sample of 2809 African Americans in 15 American cities, Edwards (1973) found that a greater proportion of light African Americans possessed a high income (above \$9000). Also, a greater percentage of light Blacks attended college, had white-collar occupations, and were from families having highly-educated parents. These findings are difficult to interpret, however, because Edwards did not conduct statistical tests of difference between skin tone groups.

Finally, two research groups utilized the 1979-80 National Survey of Black Americans (Jackson, Tucker, & Gurin, 1987) in their studies. Hughes & Hertel (1990) found that skin tone has significant relationships with education, occupational prestige, personal income, and family income, even when gender, age, and parental socio-economic status are controlled. For each resource indicator, light African Americans were higher. Keith & Herring (1991) elaborated upon Hughes & Hertel's work by examining the exact nature of the differences between skin tone groups. They found that each increment of interviewer skin tone rating corresponds to about $\frac{1}{2}$ an additional year of education. On average a very light Black person attained more than 2 additional years of education than very dark African Americans. Very light individuals were the most likely to be employed as professionals and technical workers, while very dark people

were most likely to be laborers. The family incomes of very light African Americans was more than 50% greater than those of very dark Blacks. Very light respondents' personal incomes were almost 65% higher than that for very dark respondents. Finally, Keith & Herring found gender differences indicating that skin tone plays a pivotal role in determining education, occupation, and family income for women only.

Psychological/Social Functioning

Much of what has been written regarding the psychological consequences of skin tone bias for African Americans focuses on Black women. The counseling literature describes many difficulties that women may face because of a close association between skin tone and physical attractiveness (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992; Neal & Wilson, 1989). Light-skinned women may experience misunderstanding by darker Blacks who fail to acknowledge the problems that being light presents. Also, light African American women may feel a degree of uncertainty in their dealings with men who may not be able to see beyond their bias about skin tone and relate to them as people (Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987). Dark-skinned women must cope with a larger society that says she is not attractive, as well as individuals in her own community who may echo this negative message. These women may suffer lower self-esteem as a result of such treatment (Okazawa-Rey et al., 1987).

At this point, an empirical test of these observations has not been conducted. A study to determine the impact of skin tone on African American women's body image, however, has found compatible evidence. From a sample of 66 female Black undergraduates, Bond & Cash (1992) obtained ratings of overall appearance, satisfaction with the facial region, satisfaction with own skin tone, self-perceived skin tone compared to other Black people, and ideal skin tone if one's own skin tone could be changed. They found no significant differences by skin tone for

ratings of overall appearance, facial satisfaction, or skin tone satisfaction. Inspecting the discrepancy between self and ideal skin tone ratings, however, showed that the greater the difference, the less facial satisfaction expressed by the respondent. Also, a desire to change skin tone and dissatisfaction with skin tone led to more negative ratings of overall appearance and facial satisfaction. Finally, regardless of skin tone, most of the women believed that Black men preferred light-skinned women.

Shifting the focus to both genders, Robinson & Ward (1995) conducted a study on skin tone bias and self-esteem with 123 African American adolescents from Maryland, Massachusetts, and California. The adolescents responded to a Rosenberg-derived index on self-esteem and statements about their skin tone compared to other Blacks, the degree to which they liked and disliked their skin tone, and the degree to which they would desire to change their skin tone. Robinson & Ward found a significant positive correlation between self-esteem and liking of own skin tone, such that the more a respondent liked his or her skin tone, the higher the score on the self-esteem index. They did not find a relationship between desire to change skin tone and self-esteem. Those rating themselves as “darker” than other Blacks had lower self-esteem scores than those who believed that they were “lighter” or “somewhere in between.” Finally, significant gender differences were not present for the skin tone variables and self-esteem.

Some research on the influence of bias on social functioning has also been done. Udry, Bauman, & Chase (1969) found that for men married less than 6 years, possessing dark skin tone was associated with increased job mobility orientation. These men were more likely to be willing to relocate to another city or make other concessions to advance their careers. Ransford (1970) found a weak correlation between skin tone and powerlessness. Having dark skin contributed to feelings of powerlessness to effect change in the social structure. Finally,

Holtzman (1973) found that medium brown respondents had the highest percentage scoring in the two upper points of two scales measuring competence and political efficacy.

Concluding Remarks

In this paper, I have briefly reviewed the literature concerning two possible mechanisms, preference/dislike and stereotyping, by which skin tone bias may be expressed. Also, studies investigating the connection between skin tone bias and two outcomes, resource attainment and psychological and social functioning, were explored. This review reveals several aspects of skin tone bias in need of further empirical research.

The literature for resource attainment and psychological functioning indicates many effects of skin tone bias common to both men and women. A dominant theme of a stronger impact of skin tone bias for women compared to men, however, has also been evident (Bond & Cash, 1992; Keith & Herring, 1991; Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Drake & Cayton, 1945; Marks, 1943). Women have been shown to be more detrimentally affected by skin tone bias than men. Some theories regarding this gender difference have been constructed (Boyd-Franklin, 1991; Keith & Herring, 1991; Neal & Wilson, 1989; Drake & Cayton, 1945), but systematic investigation of these theories has been rare.

Second, skin tone has been largely conceived as a status which stratifies individuals in the African American community and regulates the distribution of scarce resources. This theoretical approach has proved a useful tool for understanding skin tone bias at the societal level. It does not address, however, the phenomenological experience of skin tone bias for the individual. A strict status approach portrays the individual as buffeted by uncontrollable forces, without accounting for the possible coping styles, resulting from socialization messages and accumulated experience, which may affect vulnerability to skin tone bias. With few exceptions

(Robinson & Ward, 1995; Bond & Cash, 1992), these mediating mechanisms have been overlooked.

Finally, as was stated earlier, the skin tone literature generally finds that light-skinned Blacks benefit and dark-skinned African Americans suffer on several societal and psychological measures. Little attention has been given to the ways in which light skin may be a drawback and dark skin an asset. Observations by therapists hint at possible effects (Neal, & Wilson, 1989; Okazawa-Rey, et al., 1987), but empirical investigation is scarce. Research exploring this aspect would greatly enhance understanding of how skin tone bias affects African Americans.

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