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Skin Hue as a Barrier to Education: A Historical and Contemporary Analysis Understanding the Impact of Colorism on Black students from American Slavery to Modern Higher Education

Natasha McCombs

While watching the remake of The Wonder Years I overhear a conversation between my parents. I notice my mother say, “You see a lot of Black families on television, but never families dark like that. They may be black but definitely not dark-skinned.” This remake features an all-Black main cast, which is the opposite of the original show created in 1988. Television shows like this spark conversations in American households. In the past, films like Spike Lee’s School Daze used songs to describe Black people from different skin tones as *Jigaboos* and *Wannabees*, dark-skinned people, and lighter-skinned people, respectively. I always thought, “well aren’t we all just black?”

Margaret Hunter defines systems of racial discrimination on at least two levels: race and skin color (Hunter, 2007). The first system of racial discrimination is differential treatment and trajectories based on race. Regardless of appearance, skin color, height, weight, or facial features, Black people are subject to discrimination and dehumanization. Although the definition of racism shifts based on the space occupied, discrimination based on racial background is a clear example of racism. For example, white people may describe racism as prejudice towards non-white people, whereas Black people and other people of color may define racism as a systemic barrier to opportunities and resources (Bonilla-Silva, 2006).

The second system of racial discrimination is skin tone bias or colorism. Colorism is concerned with how dark or light the skin tone is and not solely on racial, ethnic, and/or socialized identity. Hunter (2007) describes colorism as “the process of discrimination that privileges light-skinned people of color over their dark-skinned counterparts” (Hunter, 2007).

As a concept, colorism elevates and values white aesthetics, so that positive characteristics are associated with whiteness and negative characteristics with blackness and indigenous identities (Hunter, 2016). Additionally, colorism affects the experiences of people with a marginalized racial identity not only in media as described previously but in areas ranging from education and societal mobility to relationship building. Therefore, it is essential to understand colorism to fully understand racism, intersectionality, and the wealth and education gap.

This paper aims to analyze and discuss the psychological and sociological effects of colorism on the Black community and how that affects matriculation in education and social mobility. Moreover, the research will answer the following question: How does colorism affect dark-skinned Black students’ social mobility, sense of belonging, and engagement in education?

The research compiled in this analysis will add to the existing literature around colorism while focusing on the experiences of darker-skinned students. Currently, there is limited research about how colorism affects engagement, sense of belonging, and access to education,

however, this paper hopes to fill the gap.

Methods

The purpose of this study is to examine how colorism impacts the experiences of dark-skinned Black students in secondary and higher education and how those experiences affect social mobility and success. Utilizing a series of peer-reviewed articles and books, the author examined how colorism affects the experiences of Black students to answer their research question.

Positionality

The author of the current study identifies as a dark-skinned Black woman who has attended and graduated from predominantly white institutions. Additionally, their lived experiences during both K-12 and undergraduate education informed their desire to go into education. Having encountered colorism on playgrounds, teachers mistaking them for other Black students in class, and lacking educators who looked or sounded like them, it became clear that becoming an educator and researching colorism would be pivotal to their future. Although the author has lived experiences and understands the impact bias and bullying have on racial and social development, they wanted to cultivate a deeper understanding of how research analyzes colorism and its long-term effects on students and professionals.

Systematic Review

In this study, the author sought to understand how colorism impacts the educational opportunities and social mobility of Black students, specifically how it impacts the success and advancement of dark-skinned Black students. As the author analyzed their experience, they used the words *bullied, dark-skinned, light-skinned, self-worth, biases,* and *dissonance* to describe how they felt and what they experienced. While analyzing data for this study, other scholars frequently used similar words and phrases in their research which provided insight and showed that there is a community of people who face similar challenges with colorism and skin bias.

The author narrowed the focus to articles about Black people and experiences with colorism. Once the author compiled the articles they were interested in, they searched for articles with a focus on colorism in education. Using online databases and publications, the author used the following keywords and phrases: *colorism, bullying, skin tone biases, house vs field slave mentality, higher education, social mobility, and colorism in the Black community*. As a method of collecting data, the author specifically looked at book chapters, academic journals, blogs, and testimonials.

Amongst the existing data, scholars discussed how colorism affects racially marginalized

groups (i.e., Black people, Asian people, Latinx people, etc.), the impact of colorism based on gender, and how colorism impacts romantic and platonic relationships. Because the current study focuses on the experiences of Black students, the author excluded articles solely focusing on the experiences of Latinx and Asian people from the analysis. Additionally, multiple articles discussed colorism from a historical standpoint and while those articles were included in the analysis, the author narrowed the focus to colorism and how it affects education, learning, job access, and social mobility.

Colorism researchers primarily rely on anecdotes, qualitative data, and historical artifacts in academic journals. The author was not expecting to find articles incorporating quantitative metrics into their colorism and social mobility assessments; however, those articles were crucial for the analysis.

Colorism and Slavery

Color-based discrimination, or colorism, focuses on the comparative advantages or disadvantages people of the same race have based on their skin hue and other traits, such as hair texture, facial features, and so forth (Keith & Monroe, 2015). The relationship between skin tone and societal privilege became prevalent during slavery. Keith and Herring (1991) suggest that white Americans in the early periods of slavery placed more value on slaves of mixed heritage and used skin tone or the ability to pass as white as a basis for treatment and economic value. "The ability to buy light-skinned "fancy slaves" with long hair and European features was a marker of wealth" as they were sold for higher prices in slave auctions (Kerr, 2005).

Slaves of mixed descent worked in the main house on the plantation and slave masters named them house servants. Assigned by slave masters, the house servants had more desirable positions such as cook, personal companion, butler, caretaker, and so forth (Keith & Herring, 1991). Black slaves with pure African ancestry worked in the fields with crops and slave masters and overseers assigned more physically demanding tasks (Keith & Herring, 1991).

Following the abolition of slavery, "lighter-skinned Black people continued to set themselves apart from darker-skinned Black people by socializing, marrying and procreating" with each other (Wilder, 2009). As a result, lighter-skinned individuals became more successful than their darker-skinned counterparts and passed on generational wealth and education (Keith & Herring, 1991). Colleges and universities further enforced this separation. For example, in educational systems like historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs), mixed-race students were the first to be accepted to college and allowed Black people to move toward educational equity (Reece, 2018).

History of Colorism in Education

Although the first HBCU was founded in 1837, abolitionists created interracial schools and colleges in the mid-1900s to undo the prevailing misconception that people with darker skin are uneducated (Bell, 2019). Oberlin College and New York Central College admitted students of different skin complexions to emphasize their commitment to racial equity and justice.

Although Oberlin College believed in a commitment to racial justice and equity through skin tone differences, this strategy backfired because many Black students felt singled out by faculty and other students. Darker-skinned students often felt like a minority within a minority at Oberlin College, even though the institution prohibits mistreatment of students (Bell, 2019). Additionally, several professors believed that mixed-race students deserved more empathy and were more capable than Black students with dark skin (Bell, 2019). Although this was centuries ago, systems such as schooling still reinforce these skin tone hierarchies. Researchers can use psychological phenomena such as the halo effect to further understand how people evaluate and understand each other in education and beyond (Hunter, 2016).

The Halo Effect and Education

The halo effect is the phenomena that allows people to positively analyze and make assumptions about specific traits, such as physical attractiveness. Oftentimes, people use physical attractiveness to influence and analyze intelligence, kindness, or relatability (Hunter, 2016). Perceived physical attractiveness and value are often directly correlated to white or white adjacent physical attributes such as a smaller nose, lighter skin, straighter hair, and so forth (Ryabov, 2013).

As a result, lighter skinned people are often viewed as more attractive which leads to the idea that lighter-skinned Black people are smarter than their darker counterparts (Monroe, 2015). Consequently, the halo effect largely benefits lighter skinned students in the classroom because of teacher favoritism and higher expectations in learning and behavior.

Though unintentional, teachers do not evaluate darker-skinned students using the same standards and often neglect darker-skinned students during classroom activities and instruction. “If lighter-skinned Black children are more likely to experience the halo effect with their teachers, they are also more likely to have positive relationships with their teachers,” (Hunter, 2016) which in turn leads to a more positive schooling experience. Researchers suggest that educators should be more aware of their unconscious color bias, preference for lighter-skinned parents or children, and have intentional conversations about self-image, standards of beauty, and stereotypes (Monroe, 2015).

Apart from interactions with teachers, social interactions with peers have a profound

effect on schooling experiences. From choosing friends, to dates to school dances, acceptance is highly influenced by beauty standards. Coined by Margaret Hunter, the beauty queue is a "theory that describes how skin tone affects rank-ordering of women by skin tone, with the lightest women who gain the most privilege near the front of the queue and the darkest women who experience the most discrimination near the back" (Hunter, 2012, p.57). Given the historical praises of white standards of beauty across the globe, narrow noses, fairer skin, straight hair, light-skinned students are more prone to gaining popularity in schools. In a study about colorism and internalized biases, one student recalled the experiences she had in elementary school. She expressed that the young boys in her school were "enamored" with the "light" and "Spanish-looking" girls (Wilder, 2009). The idea that the young boys were more interested in lighter skinned girls led to the student internalizing negativity placed on her darker skin and comparing her skin tone to other students (Wilder, 2009).

Empirical Measures of Colorism in Education

Comparing skin tone to other people is not uncommon and researchers have researched both skin color satisfaction and colorism within groups. In a study about Black students and experiences on a college campus, when asked if they would rather be 3 shades lighter or 3 shades darker, 75% of the participants shared that they would rather be 3 shades lighter (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). Measuring skin tone within groups became a norm, resulting in prejudice and colorism among groups. Consequently, as a form of research and analysis, skin color satisfaction scales and questionnaires were developed to assess self-perceived skin color and satisfaction.

Skin Color Satisfaction Scale

The Skin Color Satisfaction Scale (SCSS) was developed to examine various components of skin color (Jameca & Neville, 2000, Burns 2021). Bond & Cash's 3-item Skin Color Questionnaire Scale, or SCS, is the first component of the SCSS, and it assesses skin color satisfaction, self-perceived skin color (light-dark), and ideal skin color (Bond & Cash, 1992, Jameca & Neville, 2000). Researchers included four additional items to create the SCSS, a narrower analysis of skin color satisfaction.

[*Sample items from SCSS: (a) "How satisfied are you with the shade (lightness or darkness) of your skin color?"1 (less satisfied) to 9 (most satisfied) (b) "Compared to most African American people, I believe my skin color is . . ." Responses range from 1 (extremely light) to 9 (extremely dark). (c) "If I could change my skin color, I would make it lighter or darker." Responses range from 1 (much lighter) to 9 (much darker). "I wish my skin was lighter;" "Compared to the complexion (skin color) of other African Americans, I am satisfied with my skin*

color."].

Skin color satisfaction was associated with higher overall scores, and this led to the conclusion that women who were less satisfied with their skin color were also less satisfied with their physical appearances (Jameca & Neville, 2000).

Following the SCSS, Keith & Monroe (2015) explore how colorism and colorist ideologies disturb conversations that celebrate racial and ethnic improvements in education. They argue that although conversations about race and awareness of identities have improved, racial "progress" is "unmeasurable and uneven across people who are within the same race" (Keith & Monroe, 2015). Using this argument, it should be impossible to measure how colorism impacts ingroup prejudices.

In-Group Colorism Scale

Harvey et al., (2017) challenge this idea with the development of the In-Group Colorism Scale or ICS. The ICS is a 20-question questionnaire using statements regarding personal opinions regarding skin tone. Researchers created this scale to measure how important skin tone variation is among five essential categories, including self-concept, affiliation, attraction, impression formation, and upward mobility (Harvey et al., 2017). The scale was tested and duplicated using two samples totaling 783 Black American participants averaging 41 years of age. Additionally, the ICS results highlighted other topics such as skin tone, self-esteem, stereotypes, and socioeconomic status (Harvey et al., 2017). Although the ICS was not created to detect preferences of skin tone, researchers concluded the ICS scores were less biased towards lighter-skinned Black people (Harvey et al., 2017).

According to the ICS, participants' thoughts about skin tones and their actions encourage colorism in their communication and behaviors (Harvey et al., 2017). The study concluded that self-esteem was not lower for the participants who had darker skin but was lower for the participants who reinforced negative stereotypes and language related to colorism.

The Importance of Language Surrounding Colorism

Charles Parrish (1946) studied students at Louisville Municipal College to analyze language as a means describe Black people with different skin tones. Examples of words or phrases used in the study to describe these skin tones were *tar-baby, rusty black, high yellow*, and *fair* (Parrish, 1946). When asked to describe the behaviors of people in these color groups, participants described lighter skin people as "cute because they look white," "teacher's favorites", medium, brown-skinned people "nice looking and very lovable" and darker-skinned people as "evil and hard to get along with" (Parrish, 1946).

Ironically, these terms have not shifted much in the past 75 years. In a later study using

the same research techniques as Parrish, JeffriAnne Wilder examined the nine terms originally used in the Parrish study used by Black people to describe people of different skin tones and hues (Wilder, 2009). In the Wilder study, respondents used words such as “trustworthy, amiable, nonthreatening, and comfortable” to describe light-skinned women (Wilder, 2009).

Moreover, these labels point toward the favorability of lighter-skinned people. The most held view from participants regardless of their skin tone was that light skin is equal to beauty. However, the idea that light-skinned women are more attractive results in the expectation that they are superior and more deserving of opportunities (Wilder, 2009).

Brown Paper Bag & College Sororities

Historical accounts recall specific skin tone tests, such as the brown paper bag test, to determine if someone was light enough to have access to success. The brown paper bag was used to determine acceptance and inclusion; if one was fairer than a brown paper bag they were accepted while people who were darker were excluded (Kerr, 2005). Used by the Black American community in the 20th to 21st century, the phrase "paper bag test" was traditionally used to distinguish skin tone at paper bag parties, college Greek organizations, and brown bag social clubs. The implementation of skin tone standards and the creation of skin tone biased social clubs deepened the color divisions in Black America which shaped socially constructed ideas about skin tone (Wilder, 2009).

One subject described a college on-campus invitation-only graduation party as “hosted by the beautiful people” and named the paper bag party. This event used brown paper bags to describe skin tones allowed to enter this event (Kerr, 2005). There are two issues; the lighter-skinned people calling themselves the “beautiful people” which furthers the stereotype that light-skinned people are more beautiful, and the exclusion of darker-skinned people because of their skin. Because darker skinned people were often excluded by lighter skinned people from social activities, the stereotype of lighter skinned people being snobbish and arrogant erupted (Parrish, 1946; Wilder, 2009). Based on Parrish’s study, 75% of participants believed that dark-skinned women would be excluded from sororities (Parrish, 1946).

In the recreation of Parrish’s Color Names and Color Notions, one lighter skinned participant noted that people shared that she would, “…make the perfect AKA [Alpha Kappa Alpha]” because she was lighter-skinned and presumed to be stuck up (Wilder, 2009). Historically, stereotypes such as delicate, pretty, dainty, snobby, prissy, and light-skinned with long hair were used to describe members of Alpha Kappa Alpha Sorority Inc., the first black sorority (Tindall et al., 2011) Two other participants from the Wilder study who self-identify as people with darker skin noted, “because we are a little bit darker than a paper bag, people

assume that we wouldn't be AKAs." (Wilder, 2009).

Although these stereotypes are not true, they dictate how students interact with different organizations and peers on campus.

College Student Experiences

As previously discussed, colorism impacts self-esteem, classroom engagement, and social status in primary and secondary education. In a study using the terms *black, dark brown, medium brown*, and *light brown* to describe skin tone, adolescents with "black" skin tone were less likely than adolescents with medium and light brown skin to attend college (Ryabov, 2013). However, when attending college, some students face issues in their social groups as well as in the classroom.

Heckstall (2013) conducted a research study to explore two research questions specifically in higher education: "Are non-white students aware of colorism at a predominantly white collegiate institution? Is colorism a significant problem as indicated by intragroup division, prevalence, or another impact upon students?" The researchers administered a survey to 12 non-white students who attended a predominately white institution. The study showed that 75% of the respondents knew what colorism was, however, only 41% thought colorism was a significant issue. As a response to a question about combating colorism, some students responded with "*go to Africa*", "*die*," "*fight*," or "*live through it*" (Heckstall, 2013). The study showed that students believe that colorism is inevitable and will continue to negatively impact their success and overall well-being. In another study identifying the relevance of skin color and dating on a predominantly white college campus, when asked if participants experienced differential treatment in settings such as school and work, 75% or 21 out of the 28 of the participants felt their skin color influenced how people behaved towards them on at least one occasion (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). One participant recalled getting confused with another darker-skinned Black student in the classroom for the entire semester because of their skin tone (Stephens & Thomas, 2012). Such interactions can make a student feel unsafe and unsupported at their college, resulting in higher dropout rates, lower retention rates, and lower rates of professional success (Stephens & Tomas, 2012).

Impact on College to Post-College Transition

Ryabov (2013) discusses the impact of skin tone on social mobility and professional success of Black people. For this study, Ryabov studies the impacts of colorism during the college transition. This article found that Black males with lighter skin were more likely to find a job and enroll in college than Black males with darker skin tones. Additionally, the odds of completing college education were higher for adolescents with lighter skin tones (i.e., medium

brown and light brown shades) (Ryabov, 2013). This study also suggests that lighter-skinned women also achieved social mobility at a higher rate than their darker-skinned counterparts (Ryabov, 2013).

Utilizing data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health Survey), Ryabov collected data about family background, school environment, and neighborhood context. The researchers evaluated professional participation patterns by socioeconomic status, family background, and other factors. Researchers collected data in three waves, one in 1994-1995, 1996, and 2001-2002. The survey had a response rate of 79% and had a sample of adolescents between the ages of 12 and 21 years old. The research acknowledges Black people of all skin types face obstacles to social mobility advancement however because of colorism, darker-skinned people face challenges at a higher rate (Ryabov, 2013).

Recommendations

Post-secondary institutions and colleges can increase social mobility and create networks and friendships for students by educating the student population about colorism and anti-Black history. Students tend to understand what colorism is but do not know how to combat it (Heckstall, 2013). Researchers should study colorism more thoroughly across educational settings - including student organizations, classroom interactions, and social settings - to better understand how it affects Black students and professional staff. Moreover, studies on ingroup privilege for historically minoritized people should be one of the many focuses in diversity and equity research (Brown et al., 2021).

Analyzing both in-group colorism as well as skin color satisfaction is crucial to understanding how colorism impacts Black students' sense of self. The connection between colorism and skin tone satisfaction can help researchers understand how Black people subconsciously implement in-group prejudice and how they view and rank themselves in racial groups. As a result, researchers can better understand how people of color and white people understand and internalize skin tone hierarchies and how they impact education.

Blackness as we understand it is not a monolith and background, income and familial structure influences the experiences of Black students. Therefore, more programming should seek the opinions and lived experiences of Black students. Oftentimes, the educational diversity training use history and documentation of discrimination however, including the voices of students from the specific campus could be more beneficial for educating the campus community. Additionally, universities implementing implicit bias training, training series about diversity including a colorism discussion, and open dialogue about how historical instances of

colorism impact the way colleges work will impact the way colorism and racism occur on campus.

Limitations

The articles selected for this analysis expand on the diverse ways colorism impacted Black people in the past and present. However, colorism is such a broad topic it is impossible to discuss the layers and impact of colorism in society. As such for the scope of this paper, I focused primarily on Black identities without acknowledging how colorism affects people of Asian descent, Latinx identified people, Indigenous people, and other non-white ethnic groups. These identities experience colorism within their culture because of white dominance, colonialism, and white preference. Other works of literature fully examine the experiences of Latinx people and their proximity to blackness. Additionally, this paper examines the Black community as a whole and not based on gender. Black women and Black men have different experiences with colorism and an additional analysis is necessary to further understand the effects of colorism on personal development and racial identity by gender.

Additionally, the research examined in this paper expands on the experiences of Black Americans and not Black people from different countries. This analysis did not examine the experiences of immigrants who identify as black. Furthermore, since Blackness is not a monolith, the experiences of Black people differ based on factors such as environmental impacts, generational wealth, or a lack thereof and cultural awareness.

Results

Colorism emerged to create a structure of hierarchy and division within Black and Brown communities (Wilde, 2009). This system reflects biases toward skin tone variation such as lighter skin versus darker skin in racial groups rather than between them. Colorism impacts education, interpersonal connections, relationships, and social mobility. Consequently, lighter-skinned students are more likely to benefit from skin tone hierarchies while darker students are discriminated against because of internalized racism stemming from white supremacy and anti-Blackness. The use of skin-biased language in school systems inherently dictates how Black students view other Black students with different skin hues. As a result, educators must discuss colorism to work against issues that impact our education system.

Based on both qualitative and quantitative studies, the results indicate that darker-skinned Black students are denied employment and educational opportunities at a greater rate than their lighter-skinned counterparts. Consequently, the larger population view lighter skinned people as more attractive, pure, feminine, and dominant (Keith & Monroe, 2015) while darker-skinned Black people are viewed as unattractive, masculine, and misbehaved. In addition,

darker-skinned students struggle with a sense of belonging both in the classroom and in extracurriculars. Researchers acknowledge that all Black people encounter discrimination in their attempts to achieve social mobility, but darker-skinned individuals are more likely to encounter these issues.

Conclusion

Society embedded colorism or skin tone bias through years of race trauma and white supremacy. Understanding how white supremacy and white dominance overwhelmed a variety of racial groups is crucial to our education system. By educating each other and shifting our focus to understand how colorism and racial dominance impact our curriculum and systems, we can shift our educational system to be more inclusive and informative.

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